

**Submission Response**  
**from**

**Youth Affairs Network of Queensland (YANQ)**

***Putting Families First -  
Draft Policy Statement  
(Queensland Government)***

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December 2000



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## **1. About the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland**

The Youth Affairs Network of Queensland Inc. (YANQ) is the peak community youth affairs organisation in Queensland. Representing over 400 individuals and organisations from Queensland's youth sector, we promote the interests and well being of young people across the state. YANQ advocates for and with young people, especially marginalised and disadvantaged young people, to government and the community. Further, YANQ encourages and participates in the development of policies, programs, projects and research that are responsive to the needs of young people and we promote and support cultural development.

## **2. Introduction**

YANQ welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Queensland Government's Draft Policy Statement *Putting Families First*. YANQ is keen to support the development of the policy and further opportunities to input with regard to strategies and activities that 'will enhance the capacity of government to support families as a primary place of nurturing, and to ensure we can live in safe and supportive communities.' (FYCCQ 2000:1)

YANQ has particular expertise and opportunity with regard to the needs and issues of young people in the context of families. Our membership consists of many service providers working on the ground level with young people, young people and their families, young parents – young mothers and young fathers and the diversity of experiences that they bring with them in accessing community based services across the State of Queensland.

YANQ notes that there are a range of challenges to be met with regard to supporting families in Queensland, particularly given issues such as the States geographic diversity, high unemployment in some of our regional areas, increasing levels of poverty in families and the complexity of living in the new millennium.

We are keen to work with the Government in identifying and working towards addressing these many challenges and look forward to future opportunities to support the implementation of *Putting Families First*.

### **3. Young People and their Families**

The Draft Policy includes three outcomes. Outcome 2: Valuing and supporting the nurturing role of families notes a number of key meeting points such as adolescence, becoming independent and workforce attachment and ongoing learning about which we would like to highlight certain issues that must be considered in the development and implementation of strategies and activities.

Adolescence which is described in the Draft Policy as between the ages of 10 – 16 presents particular challenges. There are currently many gaps with regard to addressing some of the needs and issues of young people and their families throughout this lifecycle.

With regard to education there are currently a dearth of alternative opportunities for young people to achieve the educational attainment that is available to them in mainstream schools. For many young people main stream education does not meet their needs and they require a more supportive environment based upon a relational approach that works from where the young person 'is at'. There are currently a small number of community based alternative education sites, however, the need for these facilities far outweighs the demand. School based alternative sites annexed to state high schools do not always provide appropriate opportunities. They become 'dumping grounds' for young people who are seen as 'attention seeking', 'difficult to work with' and 'behaviourally challenged'. These young people require a response that nurtures them and gives them an opportunity to learn a range of skills in a supportive environment.

Innovative, flexible, creative responses that require some risk taking on the part of Government are the type of responses that need exploring in the context of supporting many young people and their families.

Becoming independent is becoming an increasingly interesting concept with regard to young people and their families. The age of independence varies, as does the age of adulthood with a range of milestones in youth providing discrepancies in age. Examples of this can be seen from the age at which a young person can drive a car, vote, drink, have sex, leave school, leave home, and receive income support from Government. Many young people are hampered in their move towards independence because of this plethora of inconsistencies regarding adulthood and adult identity.

Federal policies such as the implementation of Youth Allowance have resulted in increased stresses on families, young people remaining at home beyond their intentions, financial crises, family conflict and the list goes on. The introduction by the Commonwealth Government of the Youth Allowance has raised substantial issues concerning young people's access to income support. As reported in previous submission responses to State and Federal Government (YANQ 2000:11) this is a major concern for young people and their families during young people's transition to independence. Extensive consultations have been held by FaCS across the country with a range of stakeholders regarding the introduction of Youth Allowance. YANQ's Youth Allowance Working Party also held a forum for 100 workers from around the State. Amongst the most frequently cited concerns were the following:

- The treatment of eighteen year olds and over as dependents under the YA regime was strongly resented by parents and young people
- The inclusion of step-parents income in the parental means test was seen as unfair, particularly if the young people had not previously lived with the step-parent
- The impact of the extension of parental means testing on unemployed eighteen to twenty year olds and their families
- The ability and capacity of education institutions to cater for the needs of a wider group of under – eighteen
- Rates of Youth Allowance were frequently criticised as too low, particularly for young people who were on a part-rate payment, because of the parental means test
- Young people were concerned about being dependent on their parents for a longer period, the adequacy of rates, discrepancies between Youth Allowance and New Start Allowance rates (for over twenty-ones) which were disincentives to study, and Centrelink service delivery issues
- The community sector reported an increased demand for their services due to the introduction of Youth Allowance and presented case studies to highlight the impact.

Further information regarding the impact of Youth Allowance on young people and their families is available in the YANQ Youth Allowance Report, 2000.

The Commonwealth government's Welfare Reform initiative will no doubt have future impacts on income support for young people, education and training and extension of the concept of mutual obligation. With further welfare reform on the horizon we can only presume that there will be an increase in stresses for young people and their families which will ultimately be 'worn' by young people, families and communities. It is continuing challenges such as these that State Government will need to consider in a 'real' sense with regard to supporting families in Queensland.

As reported in the issues paper produced by the Queensland Council of Social Service (1999) *People and Places – a profile of growing disadvantage in Queensland*, the poverty rate almost doubled in the fourteen year period from 1981-82 to 1995-96. In that document single people under 25 and families are noted as key vulnerable population groups, including a growing trend in youth poverty. 'For example, the unemployment rate among 15 – 19 year olds in the Mackay, Fitzroy and Central-West Region was 32.5% in January 1999. This compares with the overall State rate of 8.7% for all age groups in the same period. The youth unemployment rate in this region is nearly four times greater.' (QCOS 1999:8).

**The Draft Policy notes that the main concern raised by parents regarding young people as they prepare for adult life was that of securing employment. This may indeed be the case. However, it is essential that this is not overemphasised above a range of other issues as it is equally important that the young people in these families are heard with regard to the issues that are critical to them and strategies and areas for action developed.**

It is pleasing to note in the document *Queensland Families: Across Three Generations* that research has been conducted into a number of key issues impacting on families, namely unemployment, children whose parents are imprisoned, detention of young people, rural and remote issues, suicide, domestic violence and poverty. It is however disappointing that few of the strategies, areas for action and ideas about future

investment priorities as stated in the Draft Policy Statement highlight or even allude to essential, innovative strategies required to respond effectively to these issues for young people and their families.

#### **4. Young People as Young Parents**

Young people who are parents have issues in common with families and with young people. This may seem obvious at first glance but at a practice level does Government have a framework for working with these young people, a framework that addresses their 'parentability'? Parentability would look at issues such as poverty, homelessness, violence, unemployment etc.

There must be distinct strategies for responding to young parents, responses such as advocacy and providing clear information regarding their rights as parents. Strategies are required that include providing information to young parents, who are in contact with government departments, about decisions that have been made about them.

Often there is very little recorded regarding decisions to remove a child from family and this does not assist requests for clear information. Practice needs to assist young parents to understand the decisions made. Many young mothers don't understand why they don't have their child/ren. Certainly, the decision made may be the correct decision but these young women need information as to why they don't have their child in clear 'youth friendly' language.

New models need to be investigated with regard to a commitment to preventing family fragmentation at all costs, even if that means not living together. Government strategies need to facilitate processes for developing/facilitating ongoing relationships. The Forde enquiry (circa 1998) has shown clearly that family relationships are critical, needing support and opportunities for growth.

Workers in the community working with young mothers have witnessed an over response to issues concerning criminal responsibility. There is a gender bias in this regard with young mothers more often than not charged with 'failing to protect' even when there is a male assuming the father role in the household. There is a need for specialist responses in this area. There is a need to respond to issues such as poverty, violence, homelessness and unemployment.

Work with young parents has shown that one of the most vulnerable groups of young parents are those who are 21 – 25 years having their second or third child.

With regard crisis intervention there are an enormous lack of accommodation facilities available for young people. The availability of trained staff working from a clear consistent framework in these facilities is an issue. These staff need appropriate, quality training and professional supervision.



In the future if Government is to be acknowledged as an entity that supports and resources families, then associated responses need to be appropriate. The fact remains that 15 year olds are hard to place in accommodation. Many who ring with issues not deemed crisis, don't get a service. If the Government is truly going to be involved in preventative work there needs to be adequate resourcing to do this - provision of information, effective referrals and appropriate services.

Given the transient nature of many young people, many regions need a resource centre that has the capacity to outreach to young parents. Unfortunately, the few Family Resource Centres that did exist have been defunded by Commonwealth Government.

If Government is going to move from a charity model in working with families – how is this going to be done? For example, substance misuse issues and incarceration need to be viewed as health issues, not judged from a criminal or moral perspective. A more equitable response is required. Government officers particularly those working directly with disadvantaged and marginalised young families need training and professional supervision to enable them to work with young people who may be living with these issues. If young people are met with a criminalistic/moralistic response there is little chance that they will disclose further to child protection workers. Young people fear reprisals if they disclose addiction and other issues. They may also feel that they are being judged. It is critical to work from a holistic framework, which incorporates support of the whole family in order to prevent family fragmentation.

Strategies such as respite program options need to be made available as a prevention measure, not just a crisis option. There is an enormous lack of family residential programs for all service types including prevention. Residential components in the community are essential, particularly to support and assess young parents and their ability to parent, language skill development, behaviour management and risk of harm. Government should contribute to costs of assessment as well as facilitating opportunities for training to workers in this area ensuring that all workers practice from a consistent framework.

It is critical that services model to young parents the type of behaviours that young parents themselves are being judged on, particularly with regard standards of care. Many services, however, are not resourced adequately to model these standards. For example, too often the provision of childcare to young parents attending programs is inadequate, with this relating directly to insufficient funds. Some of the SAAP environments currently offered to children, particularly in generalist night shelters, are not conducive to children's needs' (DFYCC, 1998, p.16 in Evaluation of Supported Accommodation Assistance Program In Queensland, Executive Summary)

Inadequate resourcing also results in one-worker approaches to working with young parents. There is a high correlation of history of sexual abuse with young mothers. It is critical that these young women have the opportunity to work with different workers who can model different responses, albeit within a consistent framework, however services rarely have this luxury.

It is critical that Government policy acknowledges the diversity of the lived experience of young families, that responses such as highly interventionist home visits may not

necessarily be the response sought or required by young parents and their families. Strategies and future areas for action and investment in working with these young people need to be young person centred. As well as being young parents these young women and young men are firstly young people who deserve well resourced, appropriate, accessible, affordable, creative, flexible responses that respect their experience. Too often in working with young people around 'adult' issues we take an adult (read boring) approach – e.g. counselling for sexual assault or domestic violence is provided in a framework of attending a clinical setting for a one hour appointment in an unfriendly environment – when perhaps a completely different framework is required. We need to ask these young people about the strategies and future investment priorities that they need for their young families and to continue to expand best practice models that base their framework on the needs of these young people and their families

## **5. Non English Speaking Background Families**

Members welcome the section of "Increasing Cultural Diversity" in the report *"Queensland Families – Across Three Generations"* and the statistical fact sheets that accompany the QLD Government Draft Policy which acknowledges the ethnic diversity of Queensland and sets the challenge to acknowledge that the diversity is greater than simple figures and statistics may suggest.

However, severe concern has been expressed that this acknowledgment of cultural and linguistic diversity finds no adequate expression in the accompanying policy and strategies, except for a standard 'feel good' statements such as – *"The provision of culturally appropriate services", "the development of culturally appropriate responses to strengthening communities", and "it is recognised that the cultural and ethnic diversity of Queensland families provides both social and economic benefits to our State and that different values about family life and child rearing exist within the community"*. While applauding the words that assure us that the cultural diversity of the state has not been forgotten, it is highly disappointing that the level of strategic response and mechanisms for policy implementation come nowhere close to addressing the cultural diversity and articulated needs expressed by diverse NESB communities in the state.

### **The Realities of NESB Families:**

Families of non-English speaking or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are faced with various cultural and ethno-specific disadvantages in regard to language, access, holistic wellbeing, trauma, racism and discrimination, household formation, information about support services, empowerment and community participation, just to name a few.

A further reality, is that NESB/CALD families are not a homogenous group. As noted in the "Statistical Snapshot" fact sheet, 33% of the 3.4 million people in Queensland have one or both parents born overseas. With some 160 ethnic communities in Queensland,

this not only represents a significant proportion of the population in the state, but also requires from a Government Policy Statement on Families, a higher degree of strategic response than “the provision of culturally appropriate services”.

### **The Realities of a Culturally Appropriate Families Policy:**

Any family policy must ensure that any cultural and ethno-specific disadvantages or marginalisation NESB/CALD families’ face, is not further compounded by weak strategies and delivery components by any department or service sector. The implementation processes outlined in the policy do not instill a sense of confidence that NESB families will **NOT** be further disadvantaged. This is a cause for some concern.

There is a non-negotiable need for family related policy to be proactive in its delivery outcomes and provide services at an early stage, before any disadvantage faced becomes extreme. The policy must also take on board the disadvantaged starting point for NESB/CALD families and the various specific factors that hinder their journey towards and opportunity to participate equitably in the social, cultural and economic life of the state and address these needs at a grass roots and ethnically relative level before the achieving the three outcomes noted in the Putting Families First Draft Policy can begin.

### **The Parental View of “Across Three Generations”:**

As noted earlier in this submission, the Draft Policy notes that the main concern raised by parents regarding young people as they prepare for adult life was that of securing employment. This may indeed be the case. However, it is essential that this is not overemphasized above a range of other issues especially in relation to NESB/CALD families. We would reinforce that is equally important that the young people in NESB/CALD families are heard with regard to the issues that are critical to them and strategies and areas for action developed.

### **What Young NESB People Are Saying:**

Various research and consultation opportunities have shown that while many young people have ‘problems’ with their families, and this is a ‘normal’ part of every family, those from a NESB/CALD background may experience significant ‘problems’ that are a clash of cultures. Simply, this means parents hold the language and values of the former country whilst the young people hold the values and language of the current country and in this family dynamic - conflicting cultures clash.

Recent research (Kids Help Line 2000; p7-9) notes that

*"Family relationship concerns account for 23% of calls from NESB young people and is the most frequent reason for calling Kids Help Line. This proportion is almost 30% higher than for their Anglo-Australian counterparts."*

*"Almost 60% of children and young people of Non-English speaking backgrounds report experiencing frequent or major family conflict or disruption."*

*"Qualitative analysis reveals conflict in NESB families of more likely to be intergenerational conflict as opposed to marital conflict/disruption caused by separation or divorce."*

Several strong themes have emerged as to the sources of intergenerational conflict from the Kids Help Line Research.

- *"Struggle for independence with young people feeling their parents are over protective and overly strict.*
- *Living between two cultures – parents of non-English speaking background and children growing up in an "Australian" culture.*
- *Young people feeling restricted in their choice and time with friends.*
- *Parental restrictions on dating and socializing.*
- *Academic expectations and pressure from parents,"*

In a recent QPASTT Project working young refugee survivors of torture and trauma (2000; p23), consultations with young people noted that

- *"Changes in family dynamics and roles were an issue for young survivors. They often have increased responsibilities because their English capability is better than their family's. Also when families come to Australia the support they relied on with raising children and day to day matters is often reduced, as they leave extended families or close community support.*
- *Young people struggle with attaining a stable sense of identity. This is complicated by their family's desire to ensure they retain their traditional cultural identity and act accordingly. Often this intergenerational conflict has resulted in family breakdowns and ostracism from their ethnic community."*

Contrasting the above responses from young people with recent Red Cross Research (2000; p1) with the Greater Horn of Africa Communities in Brisbane is also helpful to focus on the specific needs of NESB/ CALD communities which calls for a focused policy and strategic response.

*"The project identified that the overwhelming concern of the Greater Horn of Africa communities relates to parenting and family support issues. In particular, the project identified:*

- *that the majority of people interviewed felt that parenting is easier in their country of origin with the support of the extended family cited as the most common reason;*
- *lack of discipline and having too much freedom were the two most common issues cited by both men and women as being the most common issues why parenting was different in Australia;*
- *for many people interviewed, and Sudanese women in particular, a great deal of fear and anxiety was expressed in relation to parenting in Australia;*

- *all young people interviewed indicated that they were currently experiencing problems at home due to cultural differences; and*
- *the impact of the change of gender roles is creating stress in families. One third interviewed indicated that their role in their family had changed since arrival in Australia."*

Surely on the most basic level, any family policy which purports to acknowledge the cultural diversity of Queensland, must acknowledge the above needs, and note effectively targeted strategies to address this area of common need among many ethnic peoples and families in the state.

What also needs to be taken into account is the cultural and linguistic differences of families so that improved outcomes for all can be achieved. In the worst case, a strategic response to identified needs will have to be adapted for specific cultural, linguistic, and religious groupings to ensure that all ethnic communities are treated equitably and have access to the vital outcomes of the Families First Policy.

What is called for is detailed research and needs analysis of the family (both Young people and parental needs) of various NESB communities throughout the state, and then considered reflection regarding appropriate responses, strategies, and resources to enable an effective response to occur under the Families First framework.

### **The Role of Community:**

There is an underlying assumption about the role of communities and community networks to enhance the development and life of families. NESB families are on the receiving end of both direct, institutional, and indirect racism and discrimination. There is some doubt that their capacity for community building is at all strong. A number of other factors would have to be addressed before NESB families could take up the level of involvement suggested throughout the Families First Policy.

### **Federal Government Policy Impacts on NESB Families:**

Federal policies which are largely out of the control of the State Government, yet which have impacts on families and NESB families in particular, also need to be considered in the light of the Putting Families First Policy, especially in relation to addressing the needs and disadvantage caused by federal policy changes. For example the recent State Government decisions in regard to TVP holders in Queensland.

### **Immigration**

The decline in family reunion numbers (and user pay obligations) has meant that there is less a reality that extended families members are able to join other family members in Australia. This has had the effect of decreasing the extended helping networks that could be available to families.

This also has an effect in the area of refugee and humanitarian intakes, where stricter policies have meant that there continues to be a growing group of needy immigrants who are without the resources of other family members to assist in their emotional and

physical wellbeing. With refugee numbers in Queensland increasing, this is an area that needs to be addressed in the policy.

### **Welfare or Self Reliance?**

It is also important to note that Government policy over the last decade or so has been moving away from government responsibility to family responsibility, with families being encouraged to assume a greater responsibility towards meeting their own needs and thus develop less reliance on governmental provision of services.

From this has come the contracting out of services and movements towards user pays principles in regard to service provision.

These policy directions have lead to changes in provisions of services and resources in areas such as child care, youth allowances, facilities and services for older people. The trend has been for families to be more self-reliant in meeting their financial and practical needs, and underlying this is the assumption that family members, can collectively, have the capacity and the desire to provide various forms of assistance to other family members. In terms of families from non-English speaking backgrounds (and indeed many families) this is far from possible, in dealing with a group of people who are already marginalised and disadvantaged.

## **6. Conclusion**

It is critical that the development and implementation of '*Putting Families First*' is Government's move towards recognition that it is essential that government works as a cohesive unit both at State/Commonwealth level and interdepartmentally. Issues for young people and their families cross a range of responsibilities, including:

- Families, Youth and Community Care
- Health
- Education
- Employment and training
- Justice
- Child protection
- Housing

both in State and Federal jurisdictions. Until such time as there is recognition that the structural/policy and systemic issues impacting upon young people and their families cross the gamut of responsibilities, strategies and activities developed to support families will fail to address the needs of the whole community, including marginalised and disadvantaged young people and their families.

Reported in QCROSS 1999:16,

"If poverty is seen as a result of structural inequality within society, any serious attempt to eliminate poverty must also seek to change the conditions, which produce it. Although individual members of society are reluctant to accept responsibility for the existence of poverty, its continuance is a judgement on society, which condones the conditions causing poverty. "

From: Preface ~ 1975 Report from the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty

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