



VICTORIAN
ASSOCIATION
FOR THE CARE &
RESETTLEMENT
OF OFFENDERS
LIFE CHANGING

FAMILY LINKS GEELONG PILOT PROJECT

FINAL EVALUATION REPORT
DECEMBER 2015

Reducing harm and risk for children and families where an adult family member is involved in the Geelong Magistrates' Court and experienced incarceration in a Victorian prison. Supporting children and families as unintended victims of crime.

Roger Hastrich



Family Links Geelong Pilot Project Final Evaluation Report

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The author acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which this project has taken place, the people of the Wathaurong nation.

The author also acknowledges:

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- The time and passion of those clients who contributed to this evaluation
- The interest and commitment of support agency representatives who were interviewed
- The primary work of Lisa Ward, author of the original study into this approach to supporting children and families
- The remarkable staff of VACRO: pilot project workers Nicole Fairchild and Donna Flanagan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO) has been an advocate for offenders and families since 1872.

During this long history VACRO has been concerned to reduce the risk of harm to children and families where an adult family member is involved in the criminal justice system.

The trauma to families where an adult carer is arrested, tried and imprisoned is significant and well documented in the literature. The family unit is often affected by a complex combination of financial, social and emotional challenges. The risk of harm to children is a key concern. Tensions within the family can continue after release from prison; increasing the risk of family violence.

The criminal justice system is focussed on adults: police focus on arrests, the Courts focus on evidence and prisons focus on incarceration. These are exclusively adult domains. The best interests of children and other family members are rarely considered during this journey, despite the significant impact and the fact that children and family members are by-standers. In effect, family members are innocent unintended victims of crime.

Over the past ten years VACRO has developed a deep understanding of these issues. In 2006 the landmark study *Children, Unintended victims of legal process* outlined the lack of consideration for children in the criminal justice system. In the following year a consultation process involving a wide range of stakeholders generated a set of recommendations to protect children and reduce family distress. In 2009 VACRO commissioned a study to design a model of family support based within the Magistrates' Court environment. This significant study was the foundation for the Geelong Family Links pilot, which is the topic of this evaluation report.

The pilot project has been funded by philanthropic trust funds which have recognised an urgent need to reduce risk to children and families and to enhance community safety.

Over the past thirty months the VACRO Family Links pilot has been shaping, developing and refining the proposed 2009 model and the outcomes of this pilot period are mapped in this report. The challenge has been to strengthen effective justice responses whilst protecting children and family members.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The primary outcome of the pilot is the design of a practical, effective and efficient case work support model based around the service environment of the Magistrates' Court.

The Family Links model is based on a brief intervention case work approach where an experienced case worker contacts family members and undertakes an assessment of their support needs. Tailored assistance with information and referral is then provided by the case worker.

The pilot period has enabled the Family Links model to identify effective means to manage:

- A referral network that identifies vulnerable families
- A set of screening and assessment tools to ensure that the unique circumstances of a family are fully understood
- A suite of practical support services that are provided in a time limited manner that builds family resilience, not service reliance
- A set of line management arrangements to support the case worker in this complex role.

The services developed by the VACRO Family Links pilot involve a considered combination of supports based on the comprehensive assessment of the family environment. The service responses include:

- Information relating to the practical operation of the criminal justice system to assist families who otherwise find the journey from arrest, court and incarceration confusing and opaque
- Information and referrals to appropriate community and support services who may be able to provide specialised supports for family members
- Practical solutions to the real-world problems faced by families: financial difficulties, housing stability, negotiating with banks, schools, Centrelink and other authorities and systems.

Family Links services are generally provided 'face-to-face' in a range of settings; Court, home or a café. The client and worker may meet one to six times, with further support offered by phone/text, which ensures that information is provided in a timely manner without the fuss of an appointment.

A key characteristic of the Family Links model is the flexibility and capacity to accept referrals and deliver supports at any stage of the journey following arrest. This agility can be represented as:

POST ARREST >>	TRIAL >>	IMPRISONMENT
Whilst in the cells Awaiting trial in the community	Pre-trial On the day of the trial Post trial	During initial period
Services may include: Preparation for trial, information re. the 'system', what to expect next Emotional and practical support	Services may include: How the court functions Planning for a negative outcome What happens next	Services may include: How to locate family member in the prison system Family visits Practical arrangements: phone calls, money, etc.

In addition the model has identified strategies to support families according to their prior involvement with the criminal justice system. This flexibility can be represented as:

← A spectrum of involvement in the criminal justice system →		
Circumstance	A family with no experience of the Criminal justice system	A family where recurring criminality is a reality; perhaps across generations
Possible factors affecting family functioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of preparation for the rigours of arrest > trial > imprisonment Lack of other supports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deeply entrenched attitudes to criminality Cycle which supports intergenerational crime
Potential risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family isolation and stigma Parenting and protective concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuation of cycle places children at high risk – cumulative harm
Family Links responses may include:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen protective factors Provide emotional and practical support + information on survival in the system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support for non-offending family members to seek new solutions to recurring problems, including care of children

Outcomes of the thirty month Family Links pilot mapped in this report include:

- Interaction with over 406 people (including 199 children) in 113 families involved in the criminal justice system in relation to the Geelong Magistrates’ Court
- A total of 69 families were involved in a comprehensive family assessment and tailored intervention – this cohort included 147 children
- Factors indicating risk and vulnerability included the following: 9 clients were homeless; nearly half of the families (47%) had prior involvement with Child Protection or child support services; over half of all families demonstrated four or more risk factors (financial stress, alcohol/other drugs, housing and mental health being the most frequent risk indicators) and 57 families (82%) were reliant on social security for income
- Outcomes for families have included: reduced risk to children; increased levels of self-reliance from improved knowledge of the criminal justice system; referrals and links to specialist community support services and reduced risk of financial and housing trauma.

The Family Links pilot has also provided an insight into the potential demand for this form of service.

At no time during the thirty months of the pilot period has there been any concern regarding incoming referrals. In fact even prior to any real promotion of the pilot the case worker was able to identify and support family members via contact in the Court itself or through visiting the police cells. The overall contacts over the thirty months (406 people) relates to a part time service during the initial stages of establishment and operation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During this evaluation process it has been estimated that, annually, around 165 parents (92% male and 32 years of age on average) are imprisoned for a period of three months on average via the Geelong Magistrates' Court. Experience throughout the pilot period demonstrates that a high proportion of those incarcerated parents are involved with vulnerable families and children at risk. By comparison a full time case worker under the Family Links model may be able to provide a comprehensive service to around 40 families.

These figures indicate two key learnings from the pilot period:

- The Magistrates' Court is an effective environment to support the Family Links model
- Significant demand for this form of service has been demonstrated in Geelong and there is no reason to assume that this level of demand would not be echoed in other courts in the state.

The evaluation has identified a set of findings:

Magistrates' Court as a focal point	The Magistrates' Court is at the centre of a range of authorities and services. Interaction with the Court is life changing for many families. The Family Links pilot has demonstrated that the Court and its associated services have the capacity to identify and refer family members who are vulnerable and in need of support services.
Need for a child centred approach	The need for child centred approaches within the criminal justice system is clear if risks to children and families are to be reduced. The Family Links model demonstrates the benefits of taking a child and family centred approach and is a significant contribution to initiatives taking place across the State.
Demand for family support services	There is a clearly demonstrated demand for the Family Links program as the pilot has identified two key drivers of demand: the high levels of vulnerability within the families attending Court and the overall rate of imprisonment of adults who are in caring/parenting roles. The estimate of 50% parenting rate for prisoners supports this finding.
Meeting the needs of families	The Family Links pilot has developed an effective brief intervention model which is focussed on problem solving and resilience within families. The service reduces risk of family violence, cumulative harm to children, financial and housing stress whilst improving links to specialist services.
Service synergy	The Family Links model does not duplicate or compete with any other service. The pilot has demonstrated that the model links services and systems that are otherwise 'siloed' and/or complex and opaque. The model focusses on solutions that work across service systems with flexibility and creativity.
Value for investment	The Family Links model has demonstrated value for public investment through proactive and timely intervention and support for vulnerable families. It seems reasonable to assume that the cost of a case worker is readily offset by the averted costs of resource intensive interventions such as family court, emergency housing, tertiary physical and mental health and child protection. In addition, it is reasonable to assume that the model makes a positive contribution to the reduction of intergenerational crime.

Given the current challenge to find practical and effective solutions to reducing family violence and harm to children this evaluation urgently recommends:

1. That VACRO acknowledge the philanthropic funders who have supported this successful pilot period
2. That VACRO approach the Victorian State Government to promote the Family Links model; the outcomes of the pilot period and opportunities for state-wide implementation
3. That the Victorian State Government consider the VACRO Family Links model as an effective means to strengthen both the criminal justice systems and the family support systems across Victoria.

In conclusion, the VACRO Family Links model has been evaluated as a means of reducing risk to families and children that is of national and even international significance. VACRO is to be acknowledged for the persistent pursuit of this agenda. It is hoped that an ongoing program of family support across Victoria will enhance capacity to reduce family violence, strengthen family resilience and improve the protection of children and families.

THE CASE OF OLIVE INVOLVES OVERLAPPING INTERACTION WITH THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM, DRUG SUPPORT SERVICES AND, RECENTLY, THE COURT.

Olive is supporting her adult son, who has left a trail of havoc in the shadow of a long and complex addiction, most recently involving ice. Olive's son has children by two relationships that have ended acrimoniously. In addition, Olive has care of one grandchild and the interests of other grandchildren at heart.

Over the past years Olive has had to develop an understanding of the support services for both her son and her grandchildren. This has involved working with a range of child protection/family support services, drug support services, the police and the court. Throughout this journey Olive has focussed on asking how she can support her son and her grandchildren.

Olive has faced many challenges but without the support of the Family Links pilot she claims she would have drowned trying to work out the complex mechanisms of the court and prison cells. The project worker supported Olive through court appearances and assisted her son in the cells. This helped Olive to keep in touch with her son and to reassure him that she was there to help out. This knowledge has proven invaluable to Olive and although the journey is not over yet Olive is re-assured that she has more tools than she had before to keep on supporting her son.

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CASE STUDY 02

IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE A MORE DIFFICULT SCENARIO FOR JAKE WHEN HIS FATHER WAS LOOKING AT QUITE A LONG STRETCH IN PRISON.

At 16 and estranged from mum it seemed that the Office of Housing tenancy would be lost. The Family Links worker suggested being proactive and Dad was supported to approach the Department of Health and Human Services with a plan.

With the support of Family Links, the Department and a kindly neighbour Jake was assisted to stay living in the unit and to finish school and take on an apprenticeship.

Jake is now 18 and living independently, even reaching out to his mum.

CASE STUDY 03

BEING A YOUNG PERSON IN A FAMILY TIED UP IN A CHAOTIC CRIMINAL LIFESTYLE ALEXIS THOUGHT SHE KNEW IT ALL.

But she didn't know how she could support her toddler and partner when he was sent to prison.

In some ways Alexis had to re-build her life and the Family Links pilot assisted with a wide range of services:

- Practical support such as food, vouchers, clothing and accommodation
- Information on the court and prison systems and how to work with, rather than against these systems
- Referral to a network of support agencies to ensure the long stability of this new family.

Alexis admits now that she has grown up a lot, in a hurry and can now see what she can do to identify and achieve her goals.

1. INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

1.1 VACRO AND THE PRECURSOR STUDY

The Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO) has been playing a central role in the justice system across Victoria since 1872. VACRO services link with children and young people, families and the person leaving prison and focus on a mission to “create a safe and fair community, to respect and support individual and family dignity, and to make a positive contribution to reducing the harm done by crime.”

As an independent community based organisation VACRO links the practice of supporting people throughout the justice system with broader policy and service development initiatives across Victoria.

In 2008 the Legal Services Board of Victoria funded VACRO to complete a project to examine the potential for the Melbourne Magistrates’ Court to form a link between family support services and those family members affected by the arrest, charging, court appearance and incarceration of a family member. This study¹, undertaken by Lisa Ward Consulting Services, developed a “service model” to provide a court-based family support service that would identify families at risk: provide direct short term intervention and facilitate links to specialist family support services. The report ‘*Court Based Family Support*’ outlines:

- A rationale for the need to focus on children and families as unintended victims of crime, where great risk can arise from stress, stigma, isolation and financial strain resulting from interaction of a family member with the Court systems and prison
- Contemporary national and international examples of court based/related family support structures
- An estimate of possible demand across Victoria, based on a model relating to ABS data, given the lack of data available within the Court system
- Service specifications for a proposed Court Based Family Support program
- Broader directions for change.

1. vacro.org.au/resources/research/publications.aspx

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

1.1 VACRO AND THE PRECURSOR STUDY

The Lisa Ward study provided a conceptual framework for a service:

<p>Targeting families of:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - defendants appearing on the criminal list only - with dependent children 0-17 years only - where defendants were answering more serious charges possibly leading to incarceration - where there were indicators that the family and children were vulnerable and may be unable to access support services independently.
<p>Where referrals to the service would be received from:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the Court Network - The Salvation Army - family support workers visiting families across the system. <p>In addition, Victoria Legal Aid, Victoria Police and the Magistrates' Court staff would assist the service to identify families at significant risk.</p>
<p>Where 'direct' services included:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - crisis intervention - material and practical support - assertive outreach - assisted referral
<p>And 'indirect' services included:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - professional education within the Court - capacity building in family services - advocacy, networking and partnering.
<p>Based on service delivery principles such as:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - maintain a broad definition of families - work from a strengths base - focus on so-called hard to reach families - remain a culturally sensitive service - operate with an understanding of victims of family violence and sexual assault - focus on a partnership approach linking the criminal justice and human services systems.

VACRO project managed this 2009 study with the assistance of the Melbourne Magistrates' Court, the Department of Justice and a wide range of stakeholders. The study proposed a service to be based at the Melbourne Magistrates' Court, employing three staff at an annual cost of \$344,000. Whilst there was widespread support for the overall concept no funding was available at that time to either pilot or implement the full service model as proposed within the Melbourne Magistrates' Court. As noted below, the eventual pilot was philanthropically funded on a more modest basis in the Geelong Magistrates' Court.

The precursor study clearly emphasises the need for a far more integrated approach to supporting vulnerable families. This need is echoed in the *Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry* published by the Department of Premier and Cabinet in 2012 and chaired by the Honourable Philip Cummins:

Recurring reports and multiple substantiations of child abuse and neglect underscore the fact that a statutory child protection service of itself cannot redress the multiple and chronic issues associated with child abuse and neglect. Tackling the enduring nature of vulnerability requires a broader framework and the design of effective preventative and targeted interventions for vulnerable children and families, particularly in disadvantaged areas. So while the Inquiry accepts the reality that it is necessary for Victoria to have an efficient and effective statutory child protection service, the overall goal should be to prevent children from entering the system in the first place.

Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry, Exec Summary page xxxiv Dept of Premier and Cabinet 2012

This significant report provides further direction:

Although Victoria has a substantial range of early intervention programs with the potential to support vulnerable children, young people and their families, they do not come together to form a comprehensive, coherent and coordinated system of early interventions that address the needs of vulnerable children and their families... There is an absence of holistic service planning and coordinated provision that meets the diverse needs of a child or young person across early childhood, school, health, community-based family services and specialist adult services.

Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry, Exec Summary page xxxiv Dept of Premier and Cabinet 2012

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

1.1 VACRO AND THE PRECURSOR STUDY

The State Government response to the Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry also addresses the issue of identifying and systematically addressing vulnerability for children and families in Victoria, including:

Better services need to be effective, and to be effective services must be connected. A cookie-cutter approach does not fit the needs of thousands of vulnerable children, the families they are in, and their individual circumstances.

No service that deals with a vulnerable child or family should be considered 'stand alone', nor should any service be duplicated.

We know that children are most at risk when parental problems such as mental illness, drug and alcohol misuse, family violence, homelessness or intellectual disability impede their parent's ability to care for them appropriately.

Victoria's Vulnerable Children Our Shared Responsibility, Department of Human Services, 2012, Page 5

A more recent initiative; *Service Sector Reform, A roadmap for community and human services reform*, conducted by the Department Human Services, VCOSS and Chaired by Professor Peter Shergold AC provides further direction:

Recommendation:

Focusing on the most troubled families

An integrated, whole-of-government approach should be introduced to address the complex issues facing Victoria's most troubled families. A comprehensive cross-agency demonstration project should be instigated to measure and evaluate whether better outcomes can be achieved for those with multiple needs and, at the same time, to reduce the need for ongoing interventions.

Service Sector Reform, A roadmap for community and human services reform, Final report, Professor Peter Shergold AC, Page 39

In a sense the challenge provided by the '*Court Based Family Support*' study is to ask: What contribution to identifying and addressing vulnerability is to be made by the Magistrates' Courts and, more broadly, the criminal justice system?

The United Nations Rights of the Child devoted Article 3 to this very issue:

Article 3

1. In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

Convention on the Rights of the Child, Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly, resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989, Page 2

The original study, '*Court Based Family Support*', has provided a blueprint for the design, development and deployment of the VACRO Family Links Geelong pilot project, which commenced in February 2013.

The following principles from the 2009 study have driven the development and operation of the Geelong Family Links pilot:

- The Magistrates' Court is an appropriate and effective place to identify and support vulnerable families at a time of significant stress
- The support for children and families is of critical importance
- Providing brief but focussed intervention will be effective for families
- There is a shared responsibility for a collaborative approach between the Court, the legal and policing sectors and community support agencies to minimise risk to children and support family members who are innocent victims of crime.

1.2 ESTABLISHMENT OF THE PILOT

Following the successful publication of the 2009 ‘Court Based Family Support’ study VACRO sought investment from a range of philanthropic funds to deliver a pilot project over a three year period.

Three funds, Ian Potter Foundation, Helen Macpherson Smith Trust and the Geelong Community Foundation collaborated to provide the necessary finances for VACRO to provide a pilot service and complete an independent evaluation which would quantify the costs and possible benefits of the service model. The funding, however, was not sufficient to implement the original 2009 model for the Melbourne Magistrates’ Court, which originally advised three staff in the busiest Magistrates’ Court in Victoria.

VACRO approached the Geelong Magistrates’ Court and arrangements were put in place to implement the full model on a smaller scale. This involved VACRO:

- Allocating a project manager to the pilot
- Appointing the project worker and line manager
- Approaching a range of stakeholders to form a Reference Group
- Appointing an independent evaluator.

The first clients within the service were supported in April 2013.

The pilot project worker was accommodated in offices with another VACRO service in Geelong, Link Out, which provides transitional assistance for men exiting prison.

The immediate task for the project worker was to become familiar with the operation, people and culture of the Geelong Magistrates’ Court and to explore approaches to case finding and referrals.

“

I just didn’t know how to be there for both of them. [baby and partner]. Nicole just listened and she said I was doing OK and working things out. I hate being judged. People judge you. But I feel I can say anything to Nicole. Even if I didn’t know really what to say... she kind of knew what I was thinking, what was going on for me.”

—

Young mum and partner

“

There are some good people at the Remand Centre and VACRO who have helped out and Nikky got messages backwards and forwards. Without Nikky we would have had no way of knowing what was going on.”

—

Partner

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

1.2 ESTABLISHMENT OF THE PILOT

“

We need more family projects in prison. Like learning how to respect people, communicate; not just treat partners like a cell mate.”



Partner

“

I tried looking online for info about where he might be... I just got lost.”



Parent

During this establishment phase VACRO developed a data system to track client data and contribute to the evaluation process.

The pilot is funded from February 2013 to January 2016.

During the initial year of the pilot the primary focus was to deliver:

‘Direct services’:

- Establish a set of referral and program criteria
- Promote the pilot within those agencies relating to both the Geelong Magistrates’ Court and family support services within the region
- Establish a clear referral network
- Develop data, case file and other record systems
- Identify and support a range of clients in keeping with the original program design from the precursor study.

‘Indirect services’:

- Meet with a wide range of agencies to promote the pilot services and concurrently explore the extent of knowledge regarding the justice/prison system within family support programs
- Provide both formal and informal professional development activities to further share understandings of both the family support services and the justice/prison services – targeting children’s, family, protective, housing, financial counselling, Legal Aid and other community support services
- Explore systems that would expand our shared understanding of the challenges facing family members throughout the experience of arrest, trial, incarceration and release.

1.3 INTERIM REPORT – SERVICE EVOLUTION

An interim evaluation process took place in early 2014 and an interim report was published in May 2014. This paper drew on information from people who had used the service, partners and a review of case files.

In addition, the interim evaluation process compared the first year of operation with the initial concept proposed by Lisa Ward in 2009.

Broadly, the interim report noted a highly successful first year.

The report also provided recommendations for further service evolution, including:

- Retaining the ‘mix’ of services: information, financial and emotional support and referral to specialist agencies
- Publishing information tools for families
- Expanding professional development activities
- Working towards formal agreements with partners
- Developing more sophisticated approaches to ‘case finding’
- Exploring data management systems
- Developing a clearer sense of ‘demand’ for the service
- Routinely using a ‘rating scale’ to measure service effectiveness.

Following the publication of the interim report a second VACRO worker was employed to work in the pilot – with a specific focus on the service evolution tasks noted above.

The outcomes from this investment are noted throughout this report, however, it is clear that the service has successfully evolved, strengthened partnerships with stakeholders, improved referral and communication links and improved the collection of data.

“

... one day I saw there was a huge write up in the Adi where he had been arrested, again. I just panicked because I knew that on a Tuesday the kids read the Adi in class as part of social studies or whatever and that my son would read about his father... in class. So I rang the school and they were great. They got the papers just in time. What a nightmare – you just don’t know when something like this is just going to blow up in your face.”

”

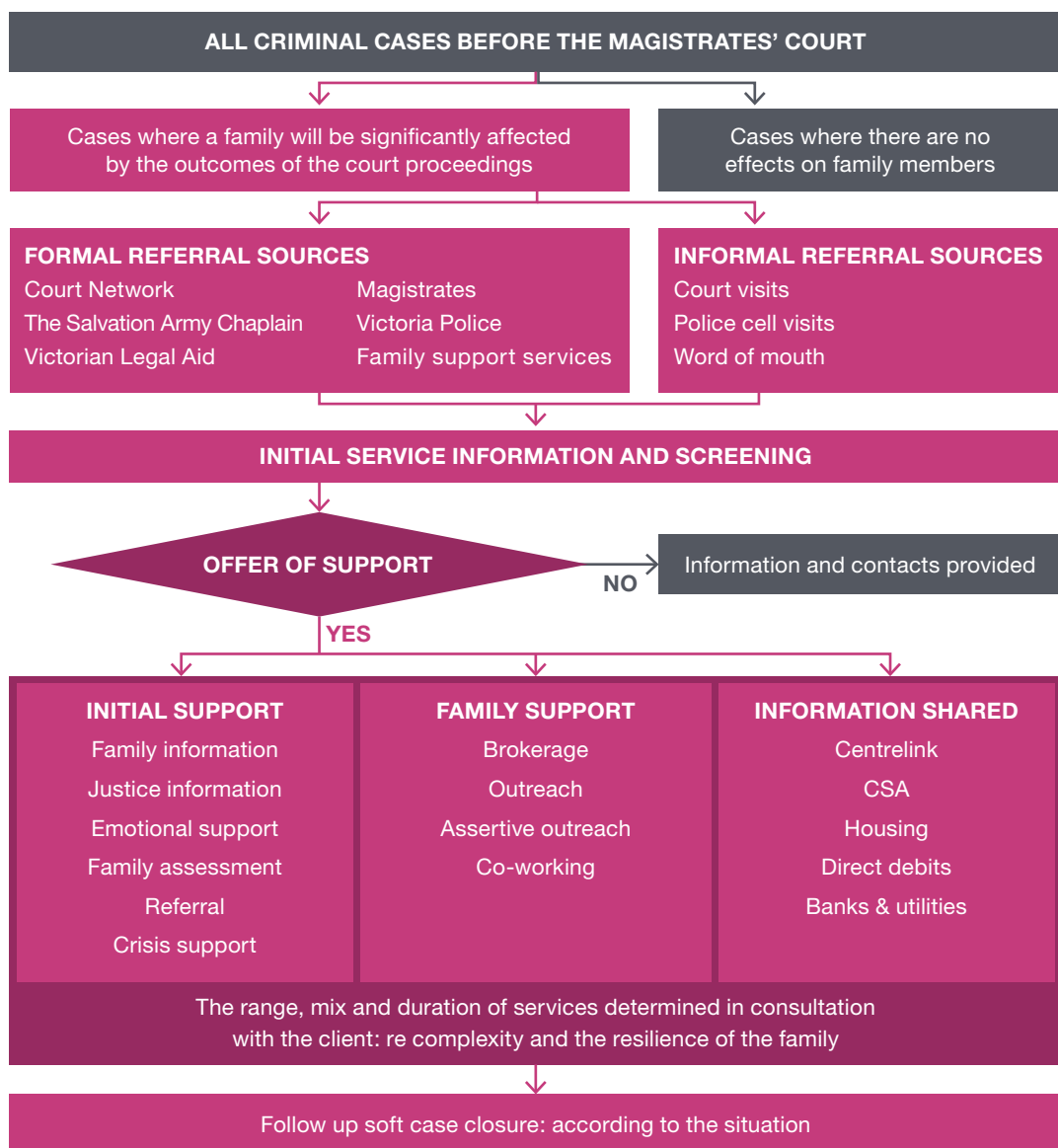
Partner

2. THE FAMILY LINKS PROGRAM

2.1 PROGRAM MODEL

2.1.1 Improving clients access to services and outcomes

The process of direct service delivery can be represented as follows:



The model demonstrates that the Magistrates' Court is an environment to identify families affected by the arrest, trial or incarceration of a family member. The Magistrates' Court directly connects with key services such as Victoria Police,

the Court Network, the Sheriff's department, family services and so forth. The Magistrates' Court and associated services form the backbone of a referral network – with a view to making referral to Family Links timely and effective.

The key stages of the direct service provision involve:

-
- Initial contact**
- Referrals are received from a wide range of sources and in each case the person is provided with initial information to assist them whilst they are screened
 - Screening for eligibility involves checking for: involvement with the criminal side of the Magistrates' Court and residing within the catchment
 - The screening also prioritises: any dependents under 17 years of age in the family who may be affected, the likelihood of incarceration, the vulnerability of a family including the likelihood of the family accessing support services independently
 - Where the screening indicates the person is ineligible the worker provides advice, reassurance and any immediately useful contacts
-
- Service offer**
- Where the screening indicates eligibility the person is offered a 'full' service including any combination of four key offerings:
 - Information regarding the criminal justice system
 - Emotional support and reassurance
 - Referral to family and community support services
 - Sharing of information with other entities eg Centrelink, Housing etc
 - The offer of service is made: the person is under no obligation to accept the offer
 - Any person who accepts the offer is accepted as the 'primary client' and is provided with further information regarding the program
 - The 'primary client' may be any member of the family or support network that surround the person who is at any point in the criminal justice system: arrest > court > prison
 - The 'primary client' may also be the accused, defendant or prisoner, in those circumstances where there are issues relating to the support of the family
 - Other members of the family or other people involved with the primary client (for example neighbours or friends) may be considered 'secondary' clients. All children are regarded as secondary clients
-
- Initial assessment**
- A family assessment is undertaken, with a focus on the protection of children, the maintenance of the family unit and prioritising issues to be addressed
-
- Service delivery**
- The 'mix' of services to be provided is determined on a case by case basis and may be supported by brokerage in the form of vouchers or payment of some agreed costs, for example outstanding bills
 - Interaction may be face to face or via phone/text
 - The duration of the service is dependent on the situation but may be limited to immediate problem solving (involving one or two interactions for advice or information) through to staged support to address complex matters; perhaps involving support over some months where criminal and family issues are complex
 - Referrals to support services may be made on an informal basis or may involve assistance, where the Family Links worker will transport and support the client through a referral and/or interview process
-
- Case closure**
- The service is not intended as substitute for any other available service and is on a brief intervention basis only; the client can cease the service at any time
 - The service undertakes a 'soft exit'; meaning the client chooses the point at which their needs are met
 - The service encourages clients to make contact if there are further issues arising, for example additional charges or court appearances in the family

THE FAMILY LINKS PROGRAM

2.1 PROGRAM MODEL

The services 'put a human face to the justice system', for example:

- Supporting a family to prepare for any stage of their journey
- Coaching parents to inform children of involvement in the criminal justice system
- Coaching and supporting parents to positively and proactively deal with other organisation such as schools, despite the fear of stigma and shame
- Managing debt; including collaborating with authorities over issues such as unpaid fines or one-off payment of bills using brokerage
- Identifying specialist agencies to support a family and following through referrals to ensure that supports are provided
- Providing practical emotional support, including reassurance that 'you are not on your own'
- Finding a loved one in the prison system when this is unknown.

The service does not provide legal advice or representation.

“

Look, I know a bit about the Court and I have helped clients before but this is different.

With the Family Links guys I was able to focus on my work – knowing that Sam was getting really good advice and support with the Court stuff.

I could get on with my real job and not have to kind-of help with the Court.”



Housing worker

2.1.2 Strengthening service capacity and collaboration

This second aspect of the service profile focusses on the 'divide' between the criminal justice system and the community services sector. The Family Links program is in a unique position to 'straddle' these two worlds and encourage mutual understanding.

The services provided by the Family Links program include any combination of the following:

- **Informal opportunities to partner with family and community service agencies on cases** – the Family Links worker is able to share information on the intricacies of the criminal justice system with a family support or housing worker whilst collaborating on a case
- **Informal opportunities to partner with justice services, the Sheriff, Police and so forth** – the Family Links Court base program is able to enhance the links between these authorities and community supports
- **Formal training events** – VACRO has invited community service workers from a range of sectors to attend a half-day event with a relatively formal curriculum to 'de-mystify' the criminal justice system
- **Informal training events** – the Family Links staff present targeted information regarding the situation of families within the criminal justice system to staff teams in workplaces, for example a large housing agency or Victorian Legal Aid
- **Presentation to Community Services and Welfare Diploma students at TAFE** – Family Links staff provide a practical and localised perspective on the circumstances for families in the criminal justice system.

I didn't quite get the point at first. Jess had been telling me about the first time her partner had been to prison and how difficult it was to track down useful information. She had listed off a few of the more important information needs: Where was he? Was he OK? How do I get clothes and stuff to him?

"Well, thank God I live in this suburb because when they heard he was in prison I had people knocking on the door with advice. They said stuff like: 'Make sure you spray the inside of his shirts with deodorant because you are not allowed to have deodorant in the cells.' Well I laughed but he reckoned he was the only decent smelling bloke in the cells. It was a great idea."

We laughed. Over the next few minutes Jess explained how she had gradually worked out how the Court and the prison systems worked through the various appearances and prison terms her partner, Kyle, had undertaken over the past few years.

"You just had to work it out yourself and use the people around you. It would have been great to have someone like Nikky back then, helping out when you really need it."

Jess stared at the table for a while.

"It's been hard. The on and off drugs and the in and out of prison and me with the four kids and a job. But, y'know he has had a shit of a life; abused as a kid, Ward of the state and that was a mess. Sometimes I think I want to do a criminal psychology degree so that I can understand him somehow. I hate the cycle but he is a good dad and I hope he is OK now." Jess choked a little finishing her sentence.

Suddenly Kyle burst into the kitchen, boisterously offering me a cup of coffee for the third time. He looked at Jess, spun around and grabbed a few tissues from the box on top of the fridge and passed them gently to her.

KYLE PAUSED AND HE LOOKED UP AT ME AND SAID, "Y'KNOW, A LOT OF US IN THERE RECKON IT IS MUCH HARDER OUT HERE FOR THEM - FOR THE WOMEN. THEY HAVE TO LOOK AFTER THE KIDS, THE HOUSE, THE JOB. IT'S HARD, IT'S REALLY HARD. WE KNOW THAT."

THE FAMILY LINKS PROGRAM

2.2 PROGRAM LOGIC

The fully implemented Family Links model can also be explored by considering underlying program logic:

Maintaining family cohesion in a range of circumstances

The program has the capacity to identify factors that affect family cohesion during this period and can adapt responses according to circumstances:

	← A spectrum of involvement in the criminal justice system →	
Circumstance	A family with no experience of the Criminal justice system	A family where recurring criminality is a reality; perhaps across generations
Possible factors affecting family functioning	Lack of preparation for the rigours of arrest > trial > imprisonment Lack of other supports	Deeply entrenched attitudes to criminality Cycle which supports intergenerational crime
Potential risks	Family isolation and stigma Parenting and protective concerns	Continuation of cycle places children at high risk – cumulative harm
Family Links responses may include:	Strengthen protective factors Provide emotional and practical support + information on survival in the system	Support for non-offending family members to seek new solutions to recurring problems, including care of children
	← Flexible response to meet identified needs →	

Protection of children

The program is hardwired to prioritise the protection of children. This is a key element of the family assessment, which considers every aspect of the current and potential future circumstances for all children. Although the program has the capacity to work directly with children, experience indicates that coaching and supporting carers (parents, grandparents and any other carers) provides the most effective immediate effect.

There are clear links to Child FIRST and Child Protection where required.

Broad entry door – support at any point in the journey

Unlike other programs which focus on a particular element of the justice system (for example programs to support family visits to prison) the Family Links program can accept referrals (including self-referrals) at any point in the pathway:

POST ARREST >> Whilst in the cells Awaiting trial in the community	TRIAL >> Pre-trial On the day of the trial Post trial	IMPRISONMENT During initial period
<p>Services may include: Preparation for trial, information re. the ‘system’, what to expect next Emotional and practical support</p> <p>Outcomes sought include: Dealing with any trauma from the arrest for children Assistance whilst accused is in the cells: information & practical support Trial preparation</p>	<p>Services may include: How the court functions Planning for a negative outcome What happens next</p> <p>Outcomes sought include: Realistic and practical approach to the trial, taking the needs of the family into account where there is a negative outcome</p>	<p>Services may include: How to locate family member in the prison system Family visits Practical arrangements: phone calls, money, etc.</p> <p>Outcomes sought include: Support for the family to adjust to this situation and plan for the protection of children and the maintenance of the family</p>

Earlier intervention

Over the three year pilot period the program has developed tools to support families as early as possible; including preparing family members for court. Earlier intervention increases the resilience of family members dealing with the challenges of court and incarceration and reduces risk of harm. In addition early intervention increases the likelihood that the defendant/prisoner will be well prepared and experience less anxiety; which benefits the defendant/prisoner but also assists the smooth operation of the Court and prisons.

THE FAMILY LINKS PROGRAM

2.2 PROGRAM LOGIC



My littlest had only ever known violence at home. When he went to kinder he just behaved like it was normal to be aggressive. The kinder teacher was great when I said, 'No, I don't think he has ADHD.' I rang a psychologist from the kinder and got my little boy counselling, with some victims of crime funding. The counsellor worked with him at a reduced fee because she could see that he would be in gaol at 14 if we didn't get in there and teach him a whole new way to get on with people... and himself."



Brief intervention

The program has been established to 'intervene briefly' in the lives of the families involved. This is based on the assumption that families do not seek to have workers in their lives and that family resilience is not fostered by long term service dependence.

The experience of the pilot phase has demonstrated that around half of the clients are supported over a one or two month period and a further quarter of the client group for up to four months, the final quarter may be involved for up to seven months. The other situation involves repeated contact with the courts and may involve two or three further contacts with the service.

In general the client and the worker may meet face to face one to four or five times and then further support is provided over the phone/text. This ensures information is provided in a timely manner without the fuss of appointments.

Passive case closure

The brief intervention approach to the service model raised questions regarding the optimal 'duration' of the service. The pilot demonstrated that this period varied from family to family and was generally limited to an average of six contacts over a period of several months.

The most effective form of case closure has been client driven – clients have generally understood when supports are no longer required based on their level of knowledge, links with other supports and family stability and resilience.

A fixed timeline for the service does not appear to be either necessary or effective.

Outcome and solution focussed

The Family Links program is geared towards generating solutions to the problems facing both families and the systems itself.

These problems are individual to circumstances but include scenarios such as:

- A carer with fines, bills and other expenses can use the program to plan and then arrange payment plans with banks, Sheriff and utilities. This support assists the banks, Sheriff and utility companies who do not want to see a family fall further into debt
- A son who underwent brain surgery in adolescence and now lives with long term substance abuse has been referred by Family Links to the regional Acquired Brain Injury service. No one had suggested this approach before to the exhausted mother desperately seeking answers
- Coming to understand that the Court is a serious place
- A very young mum was convinced to take her court appearance seriously, ensure she had representation and work hard toward receiving a community correction order rather than face incarceration for the sake of her child... she now says “What was I thinking?”
- A mother is so ashamed of the incarceration of her partner that she cannot face the school, even though her son is acting out: the service assists to negotiate with the very supportive school to alter the program and support the young man
- Older parents are shocked when they realise they have no idea where their son has been sent in the prison system; after ringing around without success the program is able to access the information for them and support them to visit
- A young mum with three kids is traumatised by her first prison visit with the kids; the service supports her to prepare for future visits, including ensuring the children are not wearing clothes with pockets or hoods.



We would have been buggered without Nikky. You sort of feel useless. You are a parent and you are supposed to look after your son but you don't know what is going to happen next. No idea, We were totally rattled... No, we didn't even think of looking online for information. We just called Nikky.”



Parent

THE FAMILY LINKS PROGRAM

2.2 PROGRAM LOGIC

“

It was hard to work out where he was... After the cells and MAP, then who knows? They don't call you and tell you and it's really stressful when you have no idea where he is and if he is OK. All I wanted to know is "is he OK?"



“

It is about protecting the kids. Like when there was another problem and it got in the paper I just shut down: you keep the kids from school and you don't go to work. But after a few days someone else's story is all over the paper and you think: 'OK, maybe it's safe to send the kids back to school.' It is really isolating, people talk.”



Humanising the systems

The model has the capacity to link sectors that do not routinely collaborate. Within any one family the service may support links between a school, a disability agency, Centrelink, Police cells, Child FIRST and a bank. The capacity to identify and solve problems for a family also assists service sectors to collaborate.

This degree of flexibility puts a human face on complex systems that members of the community find complex and intimidating. These unintended consequences of the criminal justice and social support systems causes frustration for innocent family members who perceive that they too are being punished. Many clients indicate that they are tempted to either fight the system or slip into denial.

The Family Links program provides clients with the information that is most relevant and practical at that point in time: how to arrange money for a prisoner, how long a person may be in the cells, how to dress and behave in court and so forth. There are dozens, possibly hundreds, of situations where the uninitiated family member can be confused and potentially angry and frustrated without this form of information, advice and support.

There are many brochures, websites, guidebooks and other information tools available – the challenge has always been to find the information you need at that point in time. The Family Links approach involves choreographing information availability to suit the situation and needs of the family at the right time in their journey through the criminal justice system.

In addition, the program is able to prepare clients for the process of negotiating outcomes for the family. This may involve discussing the welfare of children with the school or creating a payment plan for bills or proactively addressing fines with the Sheriff.

The pilot has demonstrated that 'systems' generally have the capacity to assist vulnerable families, however, the processes to negotiate assistance are often complex and opaque to the uninitiated member of the community.

The Family Links program is an 'honest broker', able to reassure and inform family members who are then more able to identify and assert their needs and take control of their personal situation.

During data gathering for this evaluation there have been several conversations regarding the needs of a small number of local families who seem entrenched in cycles of intergenerational crime. These are families where children are at high risk of repeating patterns of criminality learned from their parents and siblings. Authorities such as Victoria Police and the Sheriff's Department are concerned to carry out their duty in a manner that may break this cycle and provide families, particularly children, with alternative life choices. At the very least these authorities seek to carry out their duty without harm to innocent children.

One approach that has been informally discussed during the consultation is some form of collaborative planning group which, under very stringent privacy structures, could collaborate at a family level to identify coordinated approaches to delivering justice without harm to children and innocent family members.

The proposition here is that families involved with some combination of services including the Family Links program, Police, the Sheriff, By Laws even the Environment Protection Authority may be considered by this group with a view to finding long term, staged and coordinated strategies including the coordination of other agencies such as Child Protection, Centrelink, Housing and so forth. This collaborative approach could be based on the development of multi-service plans so that each agency or authority is operating with a focus on children and the long term goal of breaking through the well established cycles of participation in the criminal justice system.

It is beyond the scope of this evaluation to do anything other than recommend that further discussion between the agencies takes place with a view to using the Family Links pilot as a springboard for action.

CASE STUDY 05

EVE AND HER HUSBAND WERE TOTALLY ILL-PREPARED FOR THE SENTENCE OF PRISON.

THEY WERE ASSURED BY THEIR SOLICITOR THAT A PRISON SENTENCE WAS 'NOT GOING TO HAPPEN' AND YET; MOMENTS AFTER THE JUDGEMENT THE FAMILY WAS DIVIDED – HE WAS SENT TO THE CELLS AND SHE WAS LEFT IN COURT WITH NO PLAN B.

In the first month Eve simply lied to the five year old that 'daddy had gone away for work'. The teenage children were getting angry and disconnected. Lots of school was missed and there were long days of staying at home – the neighbours knew of their shame. Although Eve was trying to maintain contact with her husband in prison, as he moved around the state, her first priority was the children. Protecting her children was so important that Eve cried at night so that the kids could not see her. By the end of that first month the family was a mess and Eve was sliding into depression.

Eve had only one reference point for this whole new world within the prison system, a friend who had a partner in prison. The kids had been friends and Eve had even helped out when things were tough. It was this friend who had heard of the VACRO Family Links pilot and suggested Eve make the call.

The most immediate response from the project worker was to discuss new approaches for Eve to make sense of their situation with the children. By explaining that their father was not a 'really bad man' and that he had made a mistake Eve was able to stop lying to the little one and deal on a more adult footing with the teenagers. Nicole also provided advice on ways to reduce the stress of visiting – what to realistically expect. When it was clear that money in the house was a problem due to expense of visiting prison, the project worker provided vouchers to help out with the food basics.

After only meeting a few times, the Family Links pilot had provided Eve with a raft of new approaches to supporting the family and her loved one in prison. Eve looks back now and blesses the day she made the call and wonders what might have happened if support had not come along to turn around the depression, confusion and anxiety.

3. EVALUATION APPROACH

3.1 PROJECT BRIEF FROM VACRO

In March 2013 VACRO developed a project brief for the evaluation of the Family Links Pilot project. The brief states:

The VACRO Geelong Family Links project aims to establish the Magistrates Court as a new gateway to treatment and support for the families and children of defendants at risk of incarceration, by reconnecting them with local services, maintaining connections between prisoners and their families and minimising harms arising from the court process and outcome. This pilot operates from February 2013 – January 2016.

The evaluation will be designed to test whether and to what extent the Family Links pilot achieves its goals.

The project goals are described as:

1. Improve client access to services

In order to improve client outcomes, the Family Links will improve client access to services. The Family Links pilot will: raise awareness amongst referring agencies; accept referrals; contact families of defendants; actively engage target families; be available to respond to crises with an intervention; provide access to information; provide support (brokerage); follow up contact with families through community based outreach; develop a plan for assistance with key family members; facilitate referral to a range of support services for high risk/need families; exit families (with a support plan and local service listing).

This goal concentrates on achieving real outcomes for families through crisis support and improved access to services. Achieving this goal depends on several factors, many of which are linked to the second goal.

2. Enhance service capacity

In order to enhance capacity of mainstream services to respond effectively to the specific needs of families, the Family Links pilot will raise awareness, develop partnerships and improve service responsiveness. The Family Links pilot will: raise awareness of the needs of particularly vulnerable families and children; develop relationships with key programs in Department of Human Services; develop partnerships with key family & child community based support services; develop referral protocols and pathways; facilitate and assist referrals; and, provide training to enhance the capacity of mainstream services to respond more effectively to the specific needs of target families.

The project brief also outlined three deliverables:

1. A methodology to identify measurable outcomes of the project against goals
2. An interim report relating to the first year of operation
3. A final report (this document) collating all data and findings in a format that would provide VACRO and other stakeholders with a clear future direction to “inform and facilitate any expansion or extension of the program.”

3.2 EVALUATION APPROACH

A detailed evaluation framework was developed in July 2013 and includes the following:

The evaluation process is concurrent with the three year project and will inform developments within the pilot.

The overarching goal, however, is to publish evaluation documentation that:

- Provides an objective response to the original idea of a court-based family support service: the strengths and weaknesses of this idea
- If viable, makes a coherent business case regarding the establishment and development of court-based family support service within other/all Magistrates’ Court in Victoria: the value proposition and social return of investment.

The interim report (published May 2014) was used to support the evolution of the service.

This final report is based on four broad areas of exploration:

1. A review of selected literature
2. An analysis of case file data
3. Results of interviews with people who had received services
4. Results of interviews with service partners.

The ‘inputs’ from these four data sources is outlined in the following chapter.

The fifth chapter of this report considers a series of ‘enquiries’ and draws finding based on the evidence available.

The sixth chapter of this report lays out a costed plan to implement a court-based family support service across Victoria.

4. EVALUATION INPUTS

This chapter outlines a series of ‘inputs’ to the evaluation process:

- A review of selected literature
- Analysis of case file data
- Interviews with people who have used the service
- Interviews with representatives of partner organisations.

“

It is not easy doing it by yourself; looking for information. This all came at a hard time for me and the help [from the Family Links pilot] was fantastic. It is just too hard on your own.”



4.1 REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE

The Geelong Family Links pilot project delivers information, support and brokerage services to people involved in the criminal justice system in the Geelong region, focusing on the Geelong Magistrates’ Court. Generally, these people are family members of a person who has been arrested, or is on trial or in custody.

The three year pilot is based on the significant work of VACRO and Lisa Ward published in 2009, which provided a model for a court-based support service proposed to be located in the Melbourne Magistrates’ Court. The original service design was based on a review of literature relating to courts as a location for collaborative links with community services whereby the court acts as a catalyst for early intervention.

This chapter briefly considers selected literature, including the Lisa Ward study, to explore the international and Australian experience for families who are affected by the arrest, trial and or imprisonment of a relative. Although a detailed and comprehensive literature review is beyond the scope of this evaluation project it is hoped that this chapter provides some context for the evaluation process.

The literature relating to the intersection between families and justice systems is scant (Field-Pimm 2014, Marshall 2008, Robinson 2011, Scharff-Smith 2011) compared with other bodies of literature relating to criminal justice and the social sciences. Families are often described as ‘invisible’ and ‘not heard’ throughout the reading. The literature is also comparatively recent. It seems that families and children were not widely considered topics of academic consideration prior to the year 2000.

This review will focus on three themes in the selected reading: the rights of children, the effects on families and systemic failure. These themes have been selected for two reasons: each theme recurs in the reading and each theme has been a consideration in this evaluation project.

The rights of children are often placed in the context of national and United Nations charters stipulating rights such as: 'the right to family life' (Article 16) and 'only to be separated from parents only where that is in the child's interest' (Article 9), which are examples from the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child. (Marshall 2008, Barefoot Research 2007, Hannem 2015, Trotter 2015)

These studies have taken Children's rights as a benchmark, in effect, and then compared the inclusion and participation of children in situations such as the arrest of an adult carer, the trial of an adult carer or the imprisonment of an adult carer. Each study provides evidence of negative experiences for young people; experiences that generally fall short of the expectations of Charters and agreements. Studies such as Scharff-Smith (2011) take this approach in four European countries and find isolated illustrations of family friendly practice in some counties. Whilst these programs and initiatives uphold the rights of children Scharff-Smith finds these programs are not widely implemented or may only address one aspect of support for children, for example facilitating children visiting prison. Nickel (2009) reviews policy from states across the America and finds a clear pattern where the intended and desired rights of young people are not supported in policy and practice. Hannem (2015), in a national Canadian study, finds that access to services, particularly for children, is a major contributor to stress for children and families, despite having notional rights to these services. Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People (Marshall 2008) makes the case that international conventions are supported by United Kingdom and Scottish legislation and yet the practice at arrest, trial and imprisonment does not take into account these rights. Further, Marshall argues that the identified rights of children are simply not considered by policy relating to arrest, trial and imprisonment.

The proposition relating to children's rights is often explained by the 'adult' systems of justice (policing, courts and prisons) where the voice of the child is absent. Scharff-Smith (2015) argues that this phenomenon is rooted in history. He contends that prisons have been around since the 16th century in western cultures and that the American 'Auburn and Pennsylvania' prison models of the 1820s codified an ideology of 'rehabilitation through isolation'. This meant that prisoners were very deliberately isolated from family and others, often in solitary confinement for many hours of the day. The rationale behind this approach was to allow time for the prisoner to consider their situation and reflect on a personal pathway to rehabilitation. Scharff-Smith notes that this attitude pervades the contemporary prison systems of many countries, not the least of which is his native Sweden, which prohibits any visiting during remand; theoretically to avoid collusion. If this line of thinking is followed logically it would imply a hard wired inclination by the justice system to support the supremacy of prisoner isolation over the rights of children. This implies that the deprivation of family contact is an intrinsic element of the justice and custodial process. This may explain the situation where well established national and international agreements relating to rights for children are not factored into policy and practice in the criminal justice system. As will be noted, the reading highlights considerable negative effects on children where these rights are ignored. Many authors already cited argue that the rights of children are a significant factor in developing contemporary policy and practice and that a rights based approach should underpin all policy and practice.



Y'know, how come the Judge [Magistrate] can't say in Court: 'This family will need support, refer them to VACRO [Family Links]'."



EVALUATION INPUTS

4.1 REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE

The second broad area in the literature relates to the 'effects' on families where a relative is involved in the criminal justice system.

Some studies are virtually catalogues of negative effects: Allard (2011), Flynn & Field-Pimm (2014), Hannem (2015), Marshall (2008), Nickel (2009), Robinson (2011), Saunders (2013), Trotter (2015) and Vigne (2008).

Allard described these negative effects as 'costs' to children such as sense of stability and safety; economic security; sense of connectedness and worthiness; attachments and ability to trust and having a place in the world.

The national Canadian study (Hannem 2015) focussed on emotional wellbeing and noted widespread negative effects on relationships within families, social interaction and emotional health.

Vigne and other studies maps practical effects such as living arrangements and financial stress.

In many studies the link between interaction with the criminal justice system and negative 'outcomes' for families and children are considered. School participation, intergenerational crime, substance abuse, under-employment and other social, economic and emotional difficulties are canvassed. The UK Ministry of Justice (2007) considers the question of causality and correlation in considering negative outcomes for children. This paper argues that there is a strong correlation between parental imprisonment and poorer outcomes, but no proved causal link. It is argued that pre-existing social inclusion within a family (unemployment, low skill levels, mental health concerns, other criminal convictions, relationship difficulties' and abuse and neglect) are factors that lead to a 'differential impact' on families.

In general the literature indicates that effects on families and children are extensive and impactful. In some studies the negative effects are mapped at each stage of the journey: for example the experience of witnessing (sometimes violent) arrest is well documented as potentially traumatic for children. Courts are described as confronting places that are not friendly to children. The lack of information provided by prison systems following sentencing is a stressor for family members, particularly carers attempting to support children. Prison visiting systems are widely described as demeaning for adults and confronting for children. Social isolation arising from stigma is frequently mapped.

These studies also share a view that family members are innocent victims of crime and that the negative effects of this experience are intrinsically unfair. Consultation based studies (Allard 2011; Hannem 2015; Hannem 2012; PACT 2014; Saunders 2013) provide a direct voice of family members who clearly claim that they are being punished alongside their relative. The literature is peppered with accounts of unpleasant, demeaning, violent and scary interaction with police, courts and prisons. Flynn and Field-Pimm (2014) use the term 'collateral damage' and assert that the 'unintended consequences' of the criminal justice system lead to vulnerability and multiple disadvantages. The Hannem (2014) paper relating to stigma also considers the feminist perspective by arguing that the prevailing societal habit of gauging the status of women according to the status of their male partners is a significant amplifier of stigma. Hannem argues this is 'stigma by association'. Given the high rate of male imprisonment Hannem raises a concern for women who are caring for children, often in isolation from family and community due to this stigma.



Before all this started our teenage daughter wasn't getting on with her dad. They were distant and when everything blew up she withdrew completely. Nicole helped me explain things more clearly [to my daughter]. In the end I explained that this doesn't mean her dad is a really bad person. She started coming more to visits at the prison and now she's really looking forward to having a dad back home – they have got much closer.”



The reading provides a clear picture for children and other family members who have a loved one in the criminal justice system. Despite being innocent of any crime, family members 'do the time'. In the worst case scenario this may lead to poverty, inadequate housing, family turmoil and eventual involvement in crime.

Vigne considers protective factors for children. The first is a positive relationship with parent before incarceration. This protective factor is said to sustain a child during separation, to some extent, and make 'parenting from the inside' more feasible. The second protective factor is support from family, caregivers and the community. In those situations where a protective circle surrounds a family it is argued that the loss of a carer to prison is felt less keenly. These factors are said to play a significant role in the resiliency of children and the whole family.

The third theme considered in this brief review of selected literature is that of systemic failure.

A range of studies seek to determine the most basic information: how many prisoners are parents of how many children are in this jurisdiction? Many of these studies lament the lack of any system that collates this information in relation to policing, the courts and prisons. Scharff-Smith reports that Sweden and Latvia are the 'rare exceptions' as they routinely collect parenting information for prisoners. The New South Wales Justice Corrective Services also collects information relating to children at every prison presentation.

There is, however, no evidence in the literature of any jurisdiction that collects, manages and publishes meaningful data relating to each stage of the justice continuum in relation to parenting and families: arrest, trial and imprisonment.

More broadly, studies such as Dennison (2013) Trotter (2015) and Field-Pimm (2014) rely on survey tools used in particular jurisdictions and rely on extrapolation. These studies have often focussed on prisons. The Ward study (2009) attempted to estimate the numbers of children affected by parental interaction with Magistrates' Courts in Victoria using Court figures and Australian Bureau of Statistics noting average family size.

The literature echoes frustration at this lack of success with this first, most basic hurdle – quantifying family related interaction with the justice system. It is widely asserted that the (adult) justice system is not concerned with the world of children and families.

This evident disinclination is arguably symptomatic of the most critical system failure; that of effective disconnection between 'sectors'. Numerous studies describe situations where the machinery of justice is totally disconnected from the systems of community services or schools and vice versa.

In a neat infographic the Ministry of Justice (2007) in the United Kingdom describes a 'fractured' family unit where different members receive (or don't receive) supports that meet their needs (or don't meet their needs) – the father is in prison receiving drug treatment, but the mother in the community is not. The son is receiving emotional support but the father in prison is not receiving anger management and so forth. This simple diagram demonstrates a lack of 'overview', whole-of-family assessment and coordinated service provision.



[with the support of Family Links]... we are doing okay. The only thing that is pretty bad still is the family. No one calls or visits... we've been cut off."



Much of the literature indicates that the provision of assistance is based on ad hoc assessment of individuals, rather than a whole-of-family assessment – both inside the justice system and within the community.

The United Kingdom system of 'Pathways', which co-ordinate local planning, attempts to create supports for families linked to prisons. A review (Barefoot Research 2007) highlights isolated illustrations of sound practice that are almost entirely reliant on the good will and interest of individual prison staff members. The Scharff-Smith (2011) review of four European countries reaches similar conclusions.

Again, although there are isolated examples of effective practice there is no evidence of a jurisdiction that has managed to link a set of co-ordinated family supports triggered by parental interaction with the justice system: policing, courts and prisons.

EVALUATION INPUTS

4.1 REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE

There is widespread agreement in the literature that interaction with the justice system is a highly appropriate trigger point for assessing family vulnerability. Ministry of Justice (2007), Allard (2011), Dennison (2013), Flynn and Field-Pimm (2014) Justice Corrective Services (2014), Marshall (2008), Nickle (2009), Robinson (2011), Saunders (2013), Vigne (2008) and Ward (2009) argue that any form of interaction with the justice system is a source of stress for any family. This would be the case for a family entrenched in criminality and stress; as this may be the trigger for tertiary services if high risk was identified. Conversely a family with no previous history of interaction with the justice system is highly likely to experience stress as a result of this new experience.

In this way whether stress is caused by interaction with the justice system or correlated in some way the intersection between a family and the justice system is a clear flag for some form of holistic assessment.

Although many studies decry the lack of connection between the social support and justice systems there are also studies seeking to provide direction. Hannem (2015), Marshall (2008), Nickle (2009) make recommendations in this area for Canada, Scotland and America respectively.



We had no idea. We didn't think that he would get a prison sentence. We had no idea about how anything really worked until Nikky came along about a month after the trial. We have been making progress ever since."

Australia is no different in that there are limited links between justice and community service systems. The concept termed 'child aware' (Trotter 2015) in Australia involves embedding the rights and needs of children into every policy and practice related element of the 'adult' justice system. The Trotter paper proposes a comprehensive care planning framework at each stage (arrest, trial and imprisonment) that would involve sound, interagency collaborative care planning for children. This work echoes Robinson (2011) who argues for structured 'throughcare' at each stage along similar lines.

The ambition is to create a reliable framework (Trotter 2015) where each member of a family is considered as an individual in the context of the family and the current interaction with the justice system along with any pre-existing factors or difficulties. This framework is said to achieve several ends: the reduction of trauma and stress for children, improved outcomes for children, reduced stress for non-custodial carers and improved prospects of rehabilitation for the offender.



Even though you know other people who have been to prison it still feels like you are on your own. Without Nicole I would still be where I was in week one. In that first bit, before I met Nicole, I was confused; not sleeping; probably really depressed; crying at night so the kids couldn't see me. I really really needed help."

This brief review of selected literature has been undertaken as one element in the independent evaluation of the Geelong Family Links pilot project. It seems reasonable to ask how the literature connects with the experience of the pilot. The themes of this chapter have been: the rights of children, effects on families and systemic failure. The following reflections relate to these themes in connection with the design and operation of the pilot.

The rights of children:

The selected reading indicates that there is a widespread international disconnection between acknowledged rights of children (for example the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) and the performance of the justice system. The goal here is to reduce harm to children and provide an environment for children to reach their full potential, despite interaction with the criminal justice system.

As discussed, each element of the justice system is geared towards an 'adult' role: police investigate crime, courts deliver justice and prisons punish. In effect children are 'absent' or 'invisible' in the justice system. There is no overarching current framework in Victoria that links social and family services with all three of these systems. This lack of a framework begs the question relating to the safety of children, as noted by Honourable Philip Cummins in the *Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry* published by the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet in 2012.



“The services don't focus on keeping together [as a couple/family]. There is like support or counselling for him and then the support for me was sort of... 'Why don't you separate?' But I didn't want to do that. Why couldn't there be some sort of counselling together? Even whilst he is in prison.”



There is a clear 'disconnect' between the adult world of the criminal justice system and our societal understanding of the agreed rights of children. The very design of the Family Links pilot is focussed on addressing this lack of overarching framework by assessing the circumstances for children on a case by case basis.

The pilot guidelines and operating procedures ensure that the 'primary client' (who is an adult) participates in an assessment of the overall family situation, with a focus on any children and young people in the family. Emotional support, information on the justice system and practical assistance is provided to the primary client with a view to supporting their role as the primary carer in the family.

In a very practical sense the provision of the Family Links pilot supports the rights of children and young people. Other sections of this report will outline how targeted, specific interventions relating to children and young people (for example intervening at school) have enabled families to stay together, support each other and deal with stress and isolation. These interventions may take place prior to the trial or once the carer is imprisoned, this is not an issue as family members are eligible for the program at any point in the justice system journey.

This evaluation demonstrates that the rights of children are being supported based on a whole-of-family assessment, focussing on the best interests of the child.

EVALUATION INPUTS

4.1 REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE

Negative effects on families:

Other sections of this report outline the effects on families when a family member is arrested, tried and/or imprisoned. The review of selected reading further indicates that these effects are widespread and harmful. Effects range from economic, social and emotional and involve individual families differently according to protective factors such as previous experience with the justice system, inherent family resiliency and social support networks.

The design of the Geelong Family Links pilot ensures that an assessment of the whole family takes into account factors such as pre-existing circumstances, the current situation and any likely future barriers to resiliency. The experience of the pilot has provided many illustrations of timely and effective interventions that have reduced or eliminated many of the negative effects of the experience for the family. This has been the case for emotional support (advice and reassurance), information (for example preparation for trial or prison) and practical assistance (for example addressing fines or intervening with a school). The pilot has demonstrated a capacity to significantly reduce the negative effects of this experience on children, young people, carers, siblings, grandparents and even neighbours.



Well, I was looking for housing and it's hard [being young, pregnant and homeless]. They were helping me get a house and I told them about Shaun. They knew Nikky and got her to call me. I wish she had been there for the trial."



Finally, systems failure:

A range of program responses to support families and offenders have been considered within the design of the Family Links model and in considering this evaluation. These programs are generally connected to one element of the 'system' – for example a parenting program in prison or arrangements to assist families to visit prison. Whilst these initiatives are positive they do not address the broader experience of a family moving through the criminal justice system. The Geelong Family Links pilot is the only known program that has been carefully designed to link the experience of moving through the criminal justice system; commencing at the court. Open eligibility criteria, holistic family assessment and flexible service response are program features that enable the program to respond to the circumstances for that family at that point in their journey.

The holistic assessment undertaken for each family facilitates the links between the family and the service or support they need: either in the justice system (eg: visiting a family member in prison) and in the community (eg: accessing a drug treatment service).

Further than the direct service provision to families, the Family Links pilot has also developed and implemented strategies to create local links between community and social services and the justice system. This has been achieved through education sessions and the collaborative approach with police, the courts and prison staff alongside community and family support services in working with individual families.



Look, he has a drug problem, but he has been screaming out for support. Really, between us we have been to loads of services and nothing has really worked. In the end he has chosen prison as a type of therapy. In some ways that is working for him but it is hell for us."



In conclusion, this consideration of selected literature has highlighted international trends in the provision of support to families who are affected by the arrest, trial and or imprisonment of a family member.

There are many illustrations of innovative family-friendly practice around the world and the range of support services available in Victoria compares favourably.

The stumbling blocks noted so frequently in the reading are, however, just as relevant for Victoria as any other jurisdiction in the world. The criminal justice system in Victoria is not informed by undertakings such as the United Nations Rights of the Child. The Victorian criminal justice system is focussed on punishment, with limited regard for the considerable negative effects on innocent family members. Whilst Victoria can be proud of a sophisticated child, youth and family services sector and can likewise be proud of an effective criminal justice system it is not possible to claim that there are effective connections between these sectors at each point of the journey through arrest, trial and imprisonment.

This evaluation will argue that the approach taken by the Family Links pilot is an effective illustration of a practical, proactive and effective service for innocent family members at a time of great stress.

“

Everyone's got a heart. I mean, we all have to get on with our lives because we've still got children. The Government should fund something like this [Family Links] across Victoria, not just here in Geelong. I went through hell and if I could volunteer my time to help.... there are so many people out there, I don't want anyone else to have to do that. Everybody goes through pain and I feel their pain.”

”

“

When you visit you never know what to expect. You might get a visit where he can play with the kids. Or maybe there has been a problem and you only get a visit where you have to sit on chairs that are stuck on the ground. They use visits as a punishment so if something has gone wrong during the week they will just do a box visit. It is a horrible place for kids – in the box with the screen. There must be some way of punishing a prisoner who mucks up that doesn't affect the kids like that. It is horrible to use the family visit to discipline the prisoners... Why punish the families?”

”

EVALUATION INPUTS

4.1 REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE

4.1.1 Selected literature used in this evaluation

Allard, Patricia & Greene, Judith (2011) *Children on the Outside: Voicing the pain and human costs of parental incarceration*. Justice Strategies, Brooklyn, New York

Barefoot Research and Evaluation. (2007) *Keeping prisoners and their families together*, Northern Rock Foundation, United Kingdom.

Dennison, S., Stewart, A., & Freiberg, K. (2013). *A prevalence study of children with imprisoned fathers: annual and lifetime estimates*. Australian Journal of Social Issues, 48(3), 339-362.

Field-Pimm, Melanie. (2014) *Parenting Status of Community Correction Clients – Informing Service Planning*. VACRO, Melbourne

Flynn, Catherine and Field-Pimm, Melanie. (2014) *Children of prisoners: Collateral damage?* VCOSS Insight magazine, Melbourne

Hannem, Stacey and Leonardi, Louise (2015) *Forgotten Victims: the Mental Health and Well-Being of Families Affected by Crime and Incarceration in Canada*. Canadian Families and Corrections Network, Kingston, Canada

Hannem, Stacey (2012). *The Mark of Association: Transferred Stigma and the Families of Male Prisoners*. Pp. 95-117 in S. Hannem & C. Bruckert (Eds.), *Stigma Revisited: Implications of the Mark*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.

Justice Corrective Services. (2014) *Family Matters: A strategy for services and program provision to children and families of offenders*. NSW Government, Sydney.

Justice Corrective Services. (2014) *Children of parents in custody: facts and figures*. NSW Government, Sydney.

Marshall, Kathleen. (2008) *Not seen. Not heard. Not guilty. The rights and status of children of prisoners in Scotland*. Commissioner for Children and Young People. Edinburgh, Scotland. United Kingdom.



One of the worst things about visiting with the kids is that they have to turn out their pockets and prove there is nothing hidden in their hoodies... At first I made it into a game and said: 'Well daddy isn't allowed any lollies in here, they have to check.' But after a while I just made sure they were wearing plain trackies, no pockets, simple clothes. I get why they need to check this stuff but it felt like the kids were being treated like criminals – they were small kids."

Ministry of Justice. (2007) *Children of offenders review: A joint Department of Children, School and Families: Ministry of Justice review to consider how to support children of prisoners to achieve better outcomes*. Ministry of Justice. United Kingdom.

Nickel, Jessica; Garland, Crystal; Kane, Leah. (2009) *Children of incarcerated parents: an action plan for federal policymakers*. Council of State Governments Justice Center, New York, New York.

PACT. (2014) *The charter for children and young people with a family member in prison*. PACT. Vauxhall London.

Robinson, Dr Mary-Ann (2011) *Next Generation on the Outside*. VACRO, Melbourne

Saunders, V., & McArthur, M. (2013). *Children of prisoners: Exploring the needs of children and young people who have a parent incarcerated in the Australian Capital Territory*. Canberra: SHINE for Kids.

Scharff-Smith, Peter; Gambell, Lucy. (2011) *Children imprisoned parents*. The Danish Institute for Human Rights, European Network for Children of Imprisoned Parents, University of Ulster. Denmark.

Trotter, Chris; Flynn, Catherine, et al (2015) *The Impact of Incarceration on Children's Care: A Strategic Framework for Good Care Planning*. Monash University, Melbourne

Vigne, Nancy & Davies, Elizabeth & Barzell, Diana. (2008) *Broken Bonds: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents*. Urban Institute, Washington DC

Ward, Lisa. (2009) *Court based family support: a service model for the Melbourne Magistrate's Court*. VACRO, Melbourne



After all these years I guess it is just a way of life – protecting yourself and the kids. You get treated like the perpetrator. When you are not guilty...the kids aren't guilty of anything... and yet, as a family we do the time and pay the consequences."

4.1.2 The journey for VACRO

A further approach to reviewing the literature is to map a sequence of publications by VACRO that specifically relate to the supports that may assist family and children when a family member is involved in the criminal justice system.

This body of work, over nine years, reflects a commitment to families, children and the development of new approaches to support families through this difficult period:

<p>2006 Children: Unintended victims of legal process</p>	<p>This paper is a review of policies and legislation affecting children with incarcerated parents: the journey of arrest, bail / remand, sentencing and court, prison, pre and post release is considered</p>
<p>2007 Action paper: children: Unintended victims of legal process</p>	<p>This paper records a set of recommendations from consultation sessions with a wide range of stakeholders relating to the themes from the study noted above. Recommendations were made at each stage of the journey through the criminal justice system. The focus on protecting children is clear.2007</p>
<p>2009 Court based family support</p>	<p>This study is the precursor to the Family Links pilot. The model, developed by Lisa Ward, was originally intended for the Melbourne Magistrates' Court and has been used as the blueprint for the pilot.</p>
<p>2011 Next generation on the outside</p>	<p>This practical paper proposes a model of 'throughcare and planning' for families experiencing the criminal justice journey, with 'priorities for action' at each stage.</p>
<p>2014 Parenting status of community corrections clients</p>	<p>This study seeks to estimate the extent of parenting for people undertaking community corrections orders in an attempt to quantify the extent to which parenting is an issue for those offenders</p>

EVALUATION INPUTS

4.2 CASE FILE DATA ANALYSIS

This section relates to the data provided by the program in August 2015.

The pilot has tracked client service usage on a spreadsheet across the thirty months of the pilot to this point. The spreadsheet records intake arrangements, supports provided and outcomes for families.

4.2.1 The data

The Family Links pilot has connected in some way with at least 406 people in the initial thirty month period.

This includes the following groups:

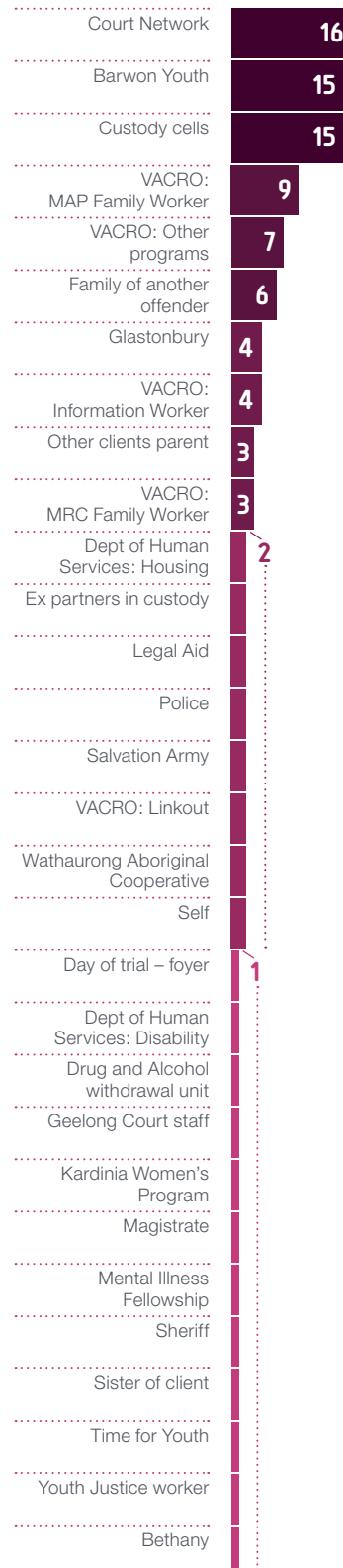
- A total of 113 'primary clients'; defined as the primary contact person for a family
- Of these 113 primary clients 94 people were the family member of a person involved in the criminal justice system and the remaining 19 people were directly involved in the criminal justice system
- A total of 199 children were noted within the families of these 113 primary clients

This tally of 406 does not include other people affected by the service; for example extended family, neighbours and friends.

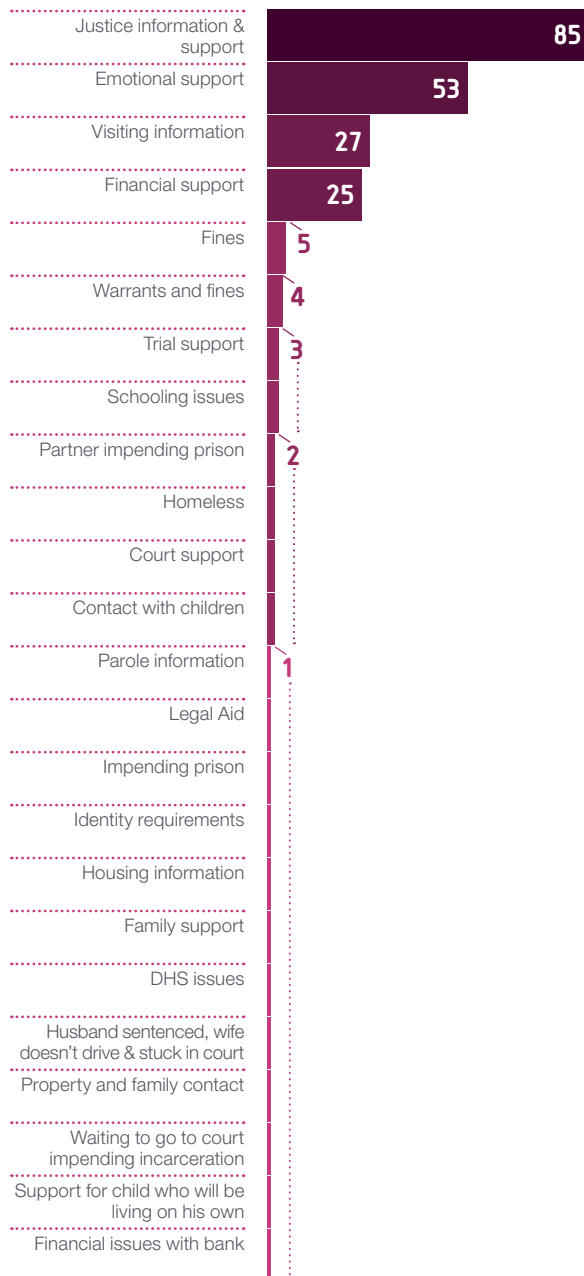
The service is designed to focus on the primary client and in all 113 cases the primary client has been supported with information and advice.

Of the 113 noted primary clients the age range was 16 to 60 years, with an average of 36 years. A total of 93 clients were female and 20 were male. Seven clients were Aboriginal and twelve were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Referral sources were noted as follows:



A total of 227 reasons for referral were indicated by the referrer as follows:



Whilst all 113 primary clients were being assisted in some way they were also screened for service eligibility – particularly relating to living within the catchment. Those primary clients identified as eligible were offered a ‘full service’ – emotional support, information, supported referral and brokerage.

A total of 69 eligible primary clients accepted a ‘full service’.

The circumstances for the person in the criminal justice system were mapped across the 69 cases as:

- 59% (41) of these cases involved a family member in the cells or in prison
- The remaining 40% (28) of cases involved the person connected with the criminal justice system living in the community, preparing for court.

The age range for the 69 primary clients was 16 to 60 years, with an average age of 33 years.

84% (58) of the clients were female and 15% (11) were male. A total of six clients were Aboriginal and a further six were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The 69 clients were carers for a total of 147 children, average of 2.1 per family; in addition two clients were pregnant at time of registration.

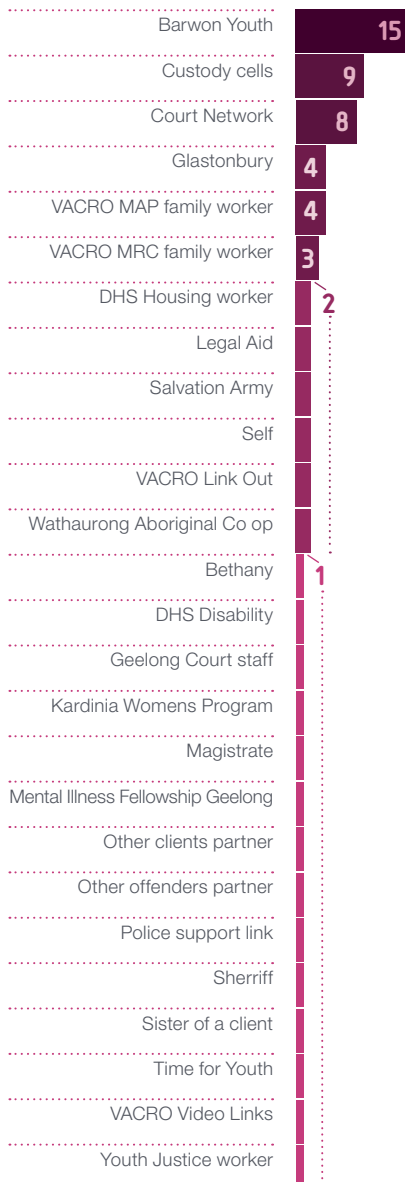
EVALUATION INPUTS

4.2 CASE FILE DATA ANALYSIS

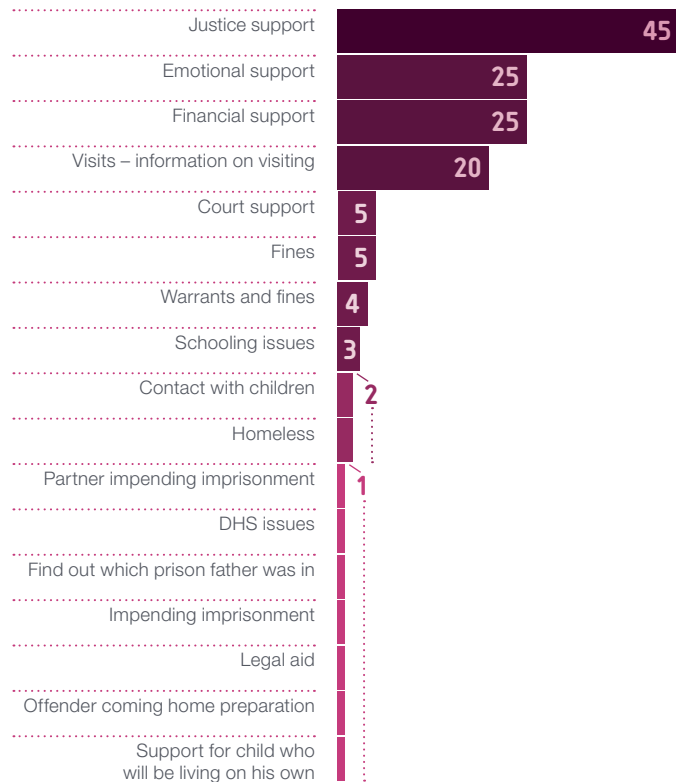
A total of 9 clients were homeless at the time of registration, the remaining clients noted their suburb of residence as:



The referral sources for this group were noted as:



A total of 144 reasons for referral were provided by the referrer as follows:



As part of the family assessment the primary client is asked to provide information on the care of children.

Of the 69 cases 91% (63) involved children: 49 instances where the children reside with the family and 14 where residential, foster care or some other form of care is involved.

Of the 63 cases involving children, in 39% (25) of these cases a carer in the criminal justice system was living in the community, including four instances where there was a warrant for the arrest of the parent / carer. The remaining 60% (38) of instances involved the parent / carer being in custody; either police cells or prison.

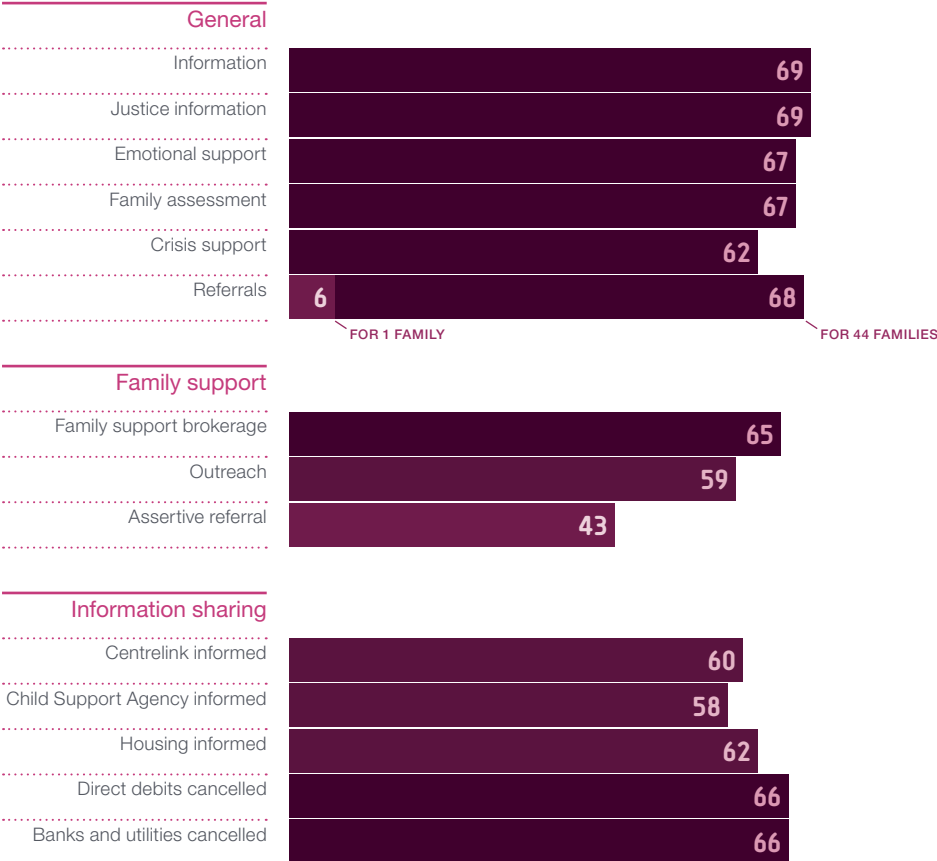
A total of 47% (30) of the 63 cases involved Child Protection at time of registration.

Prior to contact with the criminal justice system the contact with the children across the 63 situations was noted as:



Across all 63 situations there were 7 intervention orders in place. Supervised contact with children was in place for four families.

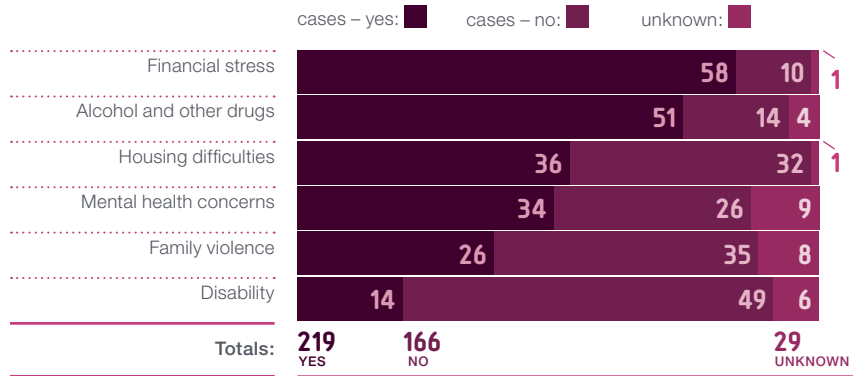
Across the full 69 cases the following services were provided:



EVALUATION INPUTS

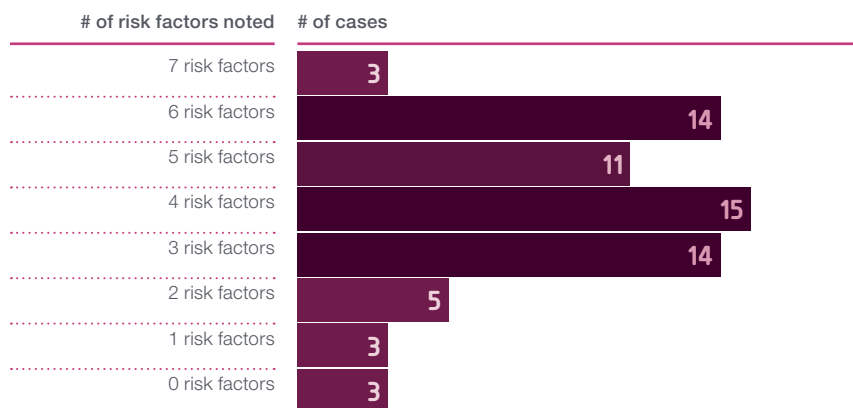
4.2 CASE FILE DATA ANALYSIS

Each of the 69 situations were assessed for a range of risk factors:



The primary source of household income was Centrelink in 82% (57) instances. In 17% (12) cases some form of employment was noted.

Further analysis across all seven risk factors indicates the number of families with a range of risk factors in their lives as follows:

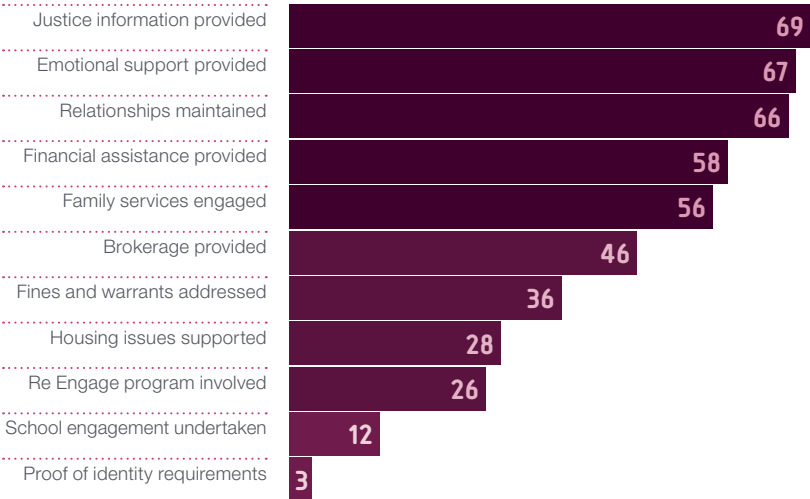


NB: the assessment above may be an under-representation due to the number of 'unknown' notations.

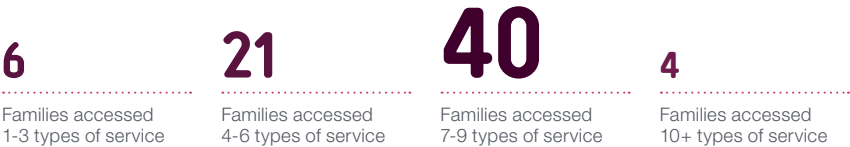
Across the thirty months of the pilot around half the primary clients have re-presented, generally as the results of further interaction with the criminal justice system. The number of re-presentations is noted as:



The pilot has mapped outcomes for families. The following graph notes a range of outcomes:



The data also records the number of service types provided in each situation. The eleven service types are records as follows:



The data also indicates that in 11 cases the contact was a single session. Some 6 cases have been provided with phone contact only.

A further review of case file data provides insight into the duration and frequency of service throughout the pilot period. There is a wide variance in both the overall duration and the number of contacts. The typical very brief intervention would involve one face to face meeting and three to six phone calls over a one month period. In more complex cases this may involve double the duration and frequency. There are, however, a small number of cases where a client has received a brief interventions a number of times (even up to four times) as there have been additional arrests and or court cases. The pilot has not ‘exited’ these clients from the program at any stage and clients have indicated that they appreciate that the service is available if it is needed again.

The issues of duration and frequency of service highlight a broad spectrum of circumstances for the overall client group. Some families are totally inexperienced in the criminal justice system and benefit from support pre trial, during the trial and through a period of incarceration. In some of these cases the family exhibits inherent reliance and seeks coaching and information. Other families experience shame, stress, stigma and confusion; these families require more extensive coaching and supported referral to specialist agencies.

“It is possible to argue that the ‘policy driver that “families have rights” is being overlooked by the “tough on crime” lobby’.”

Stakeholder

EVALUATION INPUTS

4.2 CASE FILE DATA ANALYSIS

4.2.2 Demand for services

The thirty month pilot project has attempted to assess the possible level of demand for a court based family linking service. The following data was gathered for the interim evaluation and has been provided by the Department of Justice, through the Courtlink data base.

Geelong Magistrates' Court, only: Criminal Cases Initiated

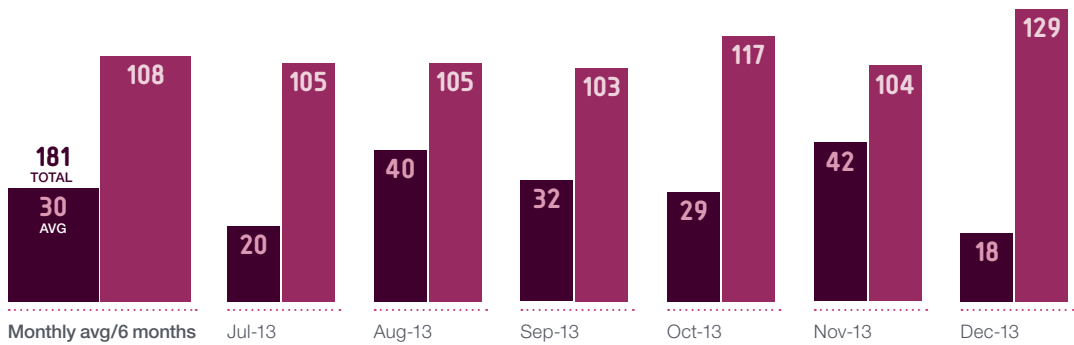


This represents a monthly average of 406 cases across the half year period.

Of those 2438 cases 181 cases were finalised with a result involving imprisonment, some 7.4% of all cases, as follows:

Cases finalised resulting in imprisonment

of cases finalised/average: ■ Average duration of imprisonment order (days): ■



Source: Data extracted from Courtlink case management system extract, Department of Justice, information sought for this report March 2014.

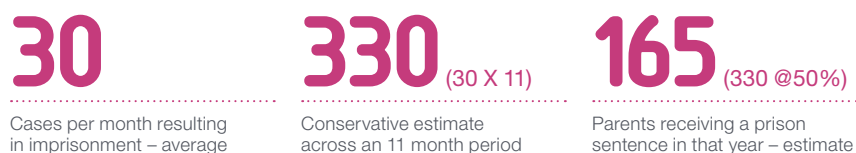
This data also indicates that, on average over this period:

- Those sentenced to prison are generally men – 92%
- The average age for both men and women is 32 years.

This data indicates that on average 27 males and 2 females (aged 32 years) are sentenced for an average 3+ month prison term through the Geelong Magistrates' Court. There is no court or prison data that indicates the parenting rate of those people imprisoned. There are several studies, however, included in the review of literature indicating that around 50% of prisoners are parents:

1. Unpublished data from the Victorian Department of Justice (2009) cited in Robinson, Dr Mary-Ann (2011) *Next Generation on the Outside*. VACRO, Melbourne – refer p 8 for the estimate of 58%
2. Dennison, S., Stewart, A., & Freiberg, K. (2013). *A prevalence study of children with imprisoned fathers: annual and lifetime estimates*. Australian Journal of Social Issues, 48(3), 339-362 – this study sought to estimate the overall numbers of children but the sample of prisoners selected randomly at registration were parents in 51% of situations – see calculations on page 343
3. Justice Corrective Services. (2014) *Children of parents in custody: facts and figures*. NSW Government, Sydney – an estimate of 51.3% of offenders received into custody had one or more children of their own.

Combining the number of cases resulting in imprisonment with this figure of parenting results in the following estimate for the Geelong situation:



The experience of the pilot suggests that a high proportion of families involved with the Magistrates' Court are vulnerable and at high risk and that virtually all families would benefit from support, even if this was only further information regarding the operation of the court, cells or prisons. The pilot has indicated that a full time case load across a year in the Family Links model would be around 40 cases per year. These figures would suggest a high level of demand for a court based support service.

EVALUATION INPUTS

4.2 CASE FILE DATA ANALYSIS

“

There are lots of things you need to learn. Like at school they made Father's Day things, all these laminated pictures. But you are not allowed to send anything that is laminated... Or the kids buy something at the Father's Day stall at school and you know they can't get it in prison. It just seems so normal to do stuff for Father's Day, y'know. It is hard on the kids.”

It may also be possible to estimate the potential demand for a family support service across the state based on the number of cases managed in the Geelong Magistrates' Court as a proportion of the overall cases managed across the Magistracy of Victoria. Data accessed on the Magistrates' Court of Victoria website² outlines the number of criminal cases finalised per year in each region as 178,534. The cases finalised in the Barwon region, of which the Geelong Magistrates' Court is the major court, totals 7,464 for that period averaged from 2008/09 to 2011/12. This provides a figure of 4.1% of all finalised cases for the Barwon region. If this figure were reduced to 3% to take into account the fact that Geelong is one court in the region it would be possible to argue that:

On average each year there may be 165 parents imprisoned for an average of three months via the Geelong Magistrates' Court. If this figure were to represent 3% of all parents imprisoned across the state the overall figure of imprisoned parents may be 5,500 people. This figure could be regarded as conservative given:

- Those who developed the 50% estimate of parenting rates claim figures to be conservative
- The estimate for annual average in the Geelong Court is based on eleven months of the year, to accommodate holiday periods
- The estimate of the Geelong Magistrates' Court as a proportion of all activity in the Barwon region is also conservative.

Perhaps the most telling indication of demand has come from the experience of the pilot period itself; from two perspectives:

Firstly, throughout the thirty month period of the pilot there has been the steady flow of enquiries and referrals, from the earliest establishment period. Even with limited initial service promotion, the program was able to connect with families in complex circumstances and the case load has been at full capacity throughout the pilot period.

Secondly, the interviews with family members who received support services from the Family Links pilot indicated that the stress associated with the journey of arrest, court appearance and prison is felt by virtually all families – almost irrespective of their knowledge of the 'system', previous experience or innate resilience. This would indicate that a high proportion of the overall 165 families estimated above would benefit from an appropriate mix of the services provided under the Family Links model.

The experience of the pilot period would seem to support the estimates explored above, which indicate that there is considerable demand for a court based support service.

2. See: www.magistratescourt.vic.gov.au/publication/criminal-law-statistics

“THE ELDEST BOY WAS ANGRY, JUST PLAIN ANGRY WITH HIS DAD. HE STARTED ACTING OUT AND BREAKING WINDOWS AT SCHOOL. I WAS IN A BAD WAY MYSELF AT THAT EARLY TIME AND WHEN NICOLE OFFERED TO TALK TO THE SCHOOL I WAS SO RELIEVED. SHE TOLD ME THAT WHEN SHE EXPLAINED THE SITUATION THE SCHOOL OFFERED TO BEND OVER BACKWARDS TO HELP US. WE CHANGED SOME OF HIS CLASSES AND HE WAS GIVEN A QUIET SPACE TO GO TO WHEN HE REALLY NEEDED IT.”

The Family Links Geelong pilot has offered training and information to community support organisations and schools. The response has been overwhelming. Community workers and teachers want to help families but don't necessarily have a detailed understanding of circumstances like this: dad is in prison, mum is in her own nightmare and a young man suddenly acts out for no apparent reason.

Initially the anger within this young man had made family prison visits stressful. Once the anger was being focussed on the school there was a real risk that, at 16 years of age, the social, emotional and educational outcomes for this young man would be negative.

Without some form of intervention and support it is possible to foresee this young man experiencing his own interaction with police and the courts.

This case study highlights significant risks within the group of prisoners' sons. It is understood that around two thirds of male prisoners have a close male family member, (father, brother, uncle) who has spent time in prison. Although there are no definitive statistics, it seems reasonable to assume that 'parenting from the inside' and providing suitable adult role models from prison is a challenge for the most competent father.

In this situation there has been a successful outcome.

The Family Links pilot worker was able to support the school to understand the situation for the whole family and the young man. The simple strategies within the school program were effective for the young man, the family and the school.

EVALUATION INPUTS

4.2 CASE FILE DATA ANALYSIS

4.2.3 Summary

In thirty months the Geelong Family Links Pilot project has connected with at least 406 people in families involved in the criminal justice system in relation to the Geelong Magistrates' Court.

Agencies referring clients have sought support such as information regarding 'the system', emotional support and financial assistance.

A total of 113 cases have been noted; ranging from a brief interaction providing information, referral information or emotional support for those who are ineligible for the full program through to situations where clients seek multiple supports to assist with complex family, children and justice concerns.

Some 69 eligible cases have been mapped during the pilot to date. The level of interaction between the Family Links program and the client has been directed by the client and has ranged from a single contact to multiple interactions.

The data indicates that there is a significant level of risk and complexity involved the majority of families who have been referred to the program. 82% of the families involved indicated three or more risk factors – over the seven domains considered. 84% of families indicated financial stress. 73% of families indicated that alcohol and other drugs were a risk factor. Half involved some form of mental health concern. 13% of cases involved homelessness and a further 52% indicated housing difficulties.

The data indicates a high level of risk for children; a total of 147 children are involved in these families. Nearly half of all families have some form of contact with Child Protection. There were seven intervention orders in place and in four situations access to children is managed under supervision.

The Family Links pilot has delivered a range of services to this group of clients which appropriately match the initial inquiry of the referrer. Services such as engagement with family support services, justice information, financial assistance and emotional support have been provided. Some 88% of families received 5 or more of the service types provided by the program. Within that group, 63% received 7 or more of the 11 service types available.

The pilot has also established that there is a significant demand for a court based family linkage service. It is possible that over 165 families per year are experiencing significant risk of harm as unintended and innocent victims of crime in the Geelong area.

4.3 SERVICE RECIPIENT INTERVIEWS

4.3.1 Approach

This element of the evaluation framework involved interviewing people who had directly received services from the Family Links pilot project.

The intent behind this approach was to hear the voices of those people who matter most to the project; the family members who are affected by the experience of arrest, trial, sentencing and incarceration and receive the service.

A total of 34 people who had received services from the pilot were approached to complete an interview with the independent evaluator / author. All had previously signed a permission form. Whilst some people were unavailable for an interview a total of 18 interviews took place, some in the latter half of March 2014 for the interim evaluation and a further group in September 2015 for the final report. This sample represents 26% of the total number of primary clients who used the full service.

Interviewees nominated a location for the interview, generally at the interviewee's home. The interviews varied in duration from 40 minutes to 95 minutes.

All interviewees were assured that:

- The interviews related to the pilot project, not their personal circumstances
- All information was confidential and that any notes taken would be shredded
- Any published reference (in case study or quote form) would be de-identified
- VACRO could be contacted if there were any concerns regarding the interview.

The interviews were conducted by the author using an open approach around three 'themes':

- 1. *How did you meet the project worker? (Was there a formal referral? / word of mouth? / informal connection?)*** In the establishment phase of the pilot the Family Links worker had developed a referral process and network across a wide range of agencies. The purpose of these questions was to identify the most effective approaches to program case finding; which approaches to referral had most effectively connected the worker with family members?
- 2. *What services were provided by the project worker? (How often did you meet? / What services were offered? / What services did you think you needed at that time? / Did you have any previous experience and knowledge of the court / legal systems or of community and family support services? / Were these services effective? / Can you rate the possible difference in your situation if there had been no Family Links service available?)*** The intention of these questions was to identify the range of needs perceived and the capacity of the program to meet those needs and deliver tangible benefits to family members.
- 3. *If this pilot was to continue... What advice would you give to VACRO? The Court? The prison system? The support services?*** These questions asked interviewees to extrapolate beyond their own experience and reflect on changes that might support a more family friendly environment within the Court and justice system in Victoria.



When he was sent up the sticks I was shocked – we just didn't have money for petrol and accommodation – it was too far to drive in one day. What with the fuel bill for the old guzzler and the accommodation it was getting so that we were running out of money for food and kids' stuff."



.....
Please note that the quotations and case study observations made throughout this report have been gathered through the interview process.

EVALUATION INPUTS

4.3 SERVICE RECIPIENT INTERVIEWS

4.3.2 Data

Key issues raised during the interviews are summarised in the following tables (issues are noted in terms of frequency, most often repeated comments appear first in the list):

THEME 01

How did you meet Nicole and Donna?

Was there a referral?

Word of mouth?

Informal connection?

- A prison contact; usually a VACRO Family Liaison worker or a prison program
- Community agency referral, as part of receiving another service, eg D&A
- Court Network
- Through a friend
- The Court
- Formal referral from a housing or youth program
- Legal Aid
- A relative who had been involved in the criminal justice system

During the interviews conducted in March 2014 (the early stages of the pilot) it was clear that the initial connection to the service was often quite informal, word of mouth or based on coincidence.

The second round of interviews highlighted that clients were more likely to have been formally referred to the program by an agency that sought specialist assistance, for example a housing worker seeking assistance with court preparation and support.

This change in referral arrangements reflects the period of time it takes to inform authorities and community agencies of a new program and establish referral systems; for example the Court Network have a bright blue box in the office that has two drawers – one for blank referral forms and one for completed referral forms.

Interviewees have remarked that the promotion of the service should be more widespread.

THEME 02

What services were provided by Nicole and Donna?

How often did you meet?

What services were offered?

What services did you think you needed at that time?
Did you have any previous experience and knowledge of the court / legal systems or of community and family support services?

Were these services effective?

Can you rate the possible difference in your situation if there had been no Family Links service available?)

- Emotional support – just being there with helpful encouragement
- Practical support – vouchers, brokerage, clothing, problem solving
- Information on the court and prison systems – how to maintain contact with loved one / manage visits / arrange support such as money
- Support during court
- Meetings took place in cafes, homes or in the Court
- In many cases there may have been one or two face to face meetings, then follow up on the phone
- Referral to support agencies
- Supporting communication between the family and the person in custody
- Support strategies for the kids / helping the kids to deal with the situation
- Talking to school about supporting the kids

Quite often the family members felt they had difficulty identify their needs due to the confusion of the time.

Families had varied levels of prior knowledge of the court and prison systems; all interviewees commented on the level of complexity and opacity within the system.

Interviewees reported a high level of satisfaction with the service as they were provided and were clear that they would have experienced considerably more stress and lost time if the service had not been so available, accessible and practical.

THEME 03

If this pilot was to continue...

What advice would you give to VACRO? The Court?

The prison system? The support services?

VACRO should:

- Maintain and build this service for every family that is at real risk
- Provide better information about services like Family Links
- The Government (the court, prisons, police) should:
- Recognise that families are innocent victims and should be treated with respect, not treated like criminals – particularly kids
- Provide funding for a program like Family Links across Victoria

The Magistrates' Court should:

- Make it easier for families to find services like Family Links, Court Network and The Salvation Army, not just leave it to chance
- Improve the 'family friendliness' of the Court – it is understood that Courts are not places for children but there are times when family members have no choice but to take children to court

Magistrates should:

- Identify cases where a family is at risk and insist on a referral to the Family Links program

Police should:

- Identify cases where a family is at risk and make a referral to the Family Links pilot

Prisons should:

- Revise the way family members are treated to ensure that innocent family members are not punished and made to feel uncomfortable

Other organisations should:

- Promote the Family Links pilot so that the right people can have access to this service.

EVALUATION INPUTS

4.3 SERVICE RECIPIENT INTERVIEWS



I reckon she's helped me emotionally as well as getting a house. She helped me to clear my head – which was just as good as getting a house. Her full focus is on you.”



4.3.3 Summary

The interviewees have universally expressed satisfaction with the Family Links pilot service.

It is clear that the service has identified the right balance between:

- Supports: practical, emotional, information
- Duration: brief intervention, rather than long term case management
- Strengths: building on strengths and developing resiliency.

Some interviewees have no other experience of the court and justice system and yet can identify that dealing with these circumstances on their own would be daunting, if not impossible. Other interviewees have considerable experience of the court and justice systems and yet were able to articulate the benefits of a support service, even having previously 'learned the ropes'.

Interviewees have indicated a feeling that they were being treated by the court and prison system as guilty rather than innocent. The complex range of practices to manage the police cells and the prisons have been criticised as demeaning and harsh – particularly for children.

This evaluation has found that a re-think of the place of family members (usually women and children or parents) as innocent unintended victims of crime with a role to play in positive rehabilitation is required.

Interviewees are able to articulate the clear benefits of maintaining a family, wherever possible, throughout this journey.

CASE STUDY 07

“SORRY,” SHE MUMBLED AS SHE FIDDLED WITH THE PHONES.

I hadn't really noticed because you see people with two phones all the time. Throughout the interview she had been juggling one to the other, tapping in texts and checking the screens.

“It's dumb, you probably think it's stupid. But I don't know how else I can feel like I am in touch with him,” she held up one phone: “This is my phone and I send texts to his phone.” She held up the second phone, with a crinkled half smile and a tear welling.

“He can't have a phone in prison of course. So I just send texts when I am thinking of him.”

She paused. After a moment I said: “That's a great idea. It must be hard to feel like you are in touch.”

“It's so hard. For weeks I didn't know where he was because he was being shoved around. And then for a while I couldn't visit because I was so crook. So, I don't know why but I started sending the texts. You probably think it is really stupid.”

Later as I drove away, I wondered about her challenge – did I think it was stupid to send a text from a phone in one hand to a phone in the other hand? What would I do? And then I realised that the texting idea made sense. There was that familiar sense of sharing thoughts with your partner in the spur of the moment – something we all do now. But there would also be a record in the phone, a record to share when they are together again.

CASE STUDY 08

ZOE WAS YOUNG, PREGNANT, HOMELESS AND IN COURT SUPPORTING HER PARTNER, WHO WAS GIVEN A PRISON TERM.

With the help of a housing provider, accommodation was arranged, tiny baby Leia was born and a referral was made to the VACRO Family Links pilot. Over the next few months Nicole supported Zoe by tracking her partner from the cells, to MAP and to prison. The project worker assisted with visiting – and maintaining contact.

Looking back, Zoe thinks this was the hardest part; not knowing where her partner was and if he was OK. Zoe has a small group of support programs helping out maintaining the housing, looking after baby Leia and managing money. The VACRO Family Links pilot provided a highly specialised set of supports at that critical time for Zoe, when she needed to know how the court and prison systems worked.

EVALUATION INPUTS

“

I don't know what I was thinking but I just thought that it wasn't my fault and the Court would get that. I wasn't even trying to get a solicitor.

So Donna and Nicole helped get a solicitor and I had no real idea that I could have been sent to gaol.

Instead I got a corrections order so I can keep being a mum.

I mean, what was I thinking?”



Young mum

“

Having someone [Nicole] to help you prepare for court is heaps better. Court is really hard. They brush you in and brush you out.”



4.4 SERVICE PARTNER INTERVIEWS

4.4.1 Approach

This element of the evaluation framework involved fifteen interviews with key partners.

The first round of interviews took place in March 2014 for the interim evaluation. A further round of interviews was conducted in September 2015 and focussed on services that have worked collaboratively with the pilot.

Interview themes included:

- Impression of the broad issues facing family members when someone is arrested, tried and imprisoned
- Overall sense of the potential downstream consequences for families
- Current opportunities and challenges in using the court as a location to link family members with support services
- The effectiveness of the service
- Long term approaches to establishing the program on an ongoing basis
- The value of the professional development activities delivered by the pilot was also discussed. The demand within community services for further information regarding the complex criminal justice system has been clearly demonstrated.

Interviews were held with key representatives from:

- Geelong Magistrates' Court
- Department of Justice
- Victoria Legal Aid
- Court Network
- Victoria Police
- The Sheriff's Department
- Barwon Youth
- The Salvation Army
- Department of Health and Human Services
- Bethany Community Support

4.4.2 Data

Whilst the interviews covered a broad range of topics and perspectives comments can be grouped into the following key themes:

- There are significant effects on family members experiencing cumulative trauma relating to arrest, trial and incarceration of a family member
- The Court environment provides opportunities to identify and support vulnerable families
- The need to support family members as unintended victims of crime is growing, not diminishing, as a consequence of broad policy shifts in Victoria
- The pilot has clearly demonstrated that this form of service assist both families and service providers.

Comments relating to each theme are summarised below:

There are significant effects on family members experiencing cumulative trauma relating to arrest, trial and incarceration of a family member

- Family support programs are aware of significant social, economic and emotional effects on family members, particularly children
- There is a known correlation between participation in child protection and justice systems
- Participation in court / prison can be one of many life events that reinforce vulnerability
- Preparing for a trial can be made more complex where an individual is concerned for the welfare of their family in the event of a prison term
- Conversely, offenders leaving prison are significantly disadvantaged if they do not have a cohesive family / home to return to: parole preparations can be thwarted where there is no stable accommodation

The Court environment provides opportunities to identify and support vulnerable families

- The experience of programs such as The Salvation Army and Court Network indicates that an appearance at Court is traumatic for many people. In addition to immediate information and support 'on the day' there is a need for some form of longer-term intervention / support. We cannot have 'specialist everything' just for the justice system, although for example there are now mental health supports, it makes more sense to link families with specialist agencies through a 'pathway' like the Family Links pilot.
- There are several opportunities for agencies to provide information and / or referral to the Family Links pilot:
- Victoria Police may be able to include information in the Committal Brief or the Hand Up Brief – police in the cells have also supported contact between inmates and the pilot services
- The Salvation Army and Court Network are well placed to assess situations where the need for a longer term intervention to address complex family issues is evident
- Victoria Legal Aid solicitors can facilitate referrals to the Family Links project, potentially as part of the 'holistic lawyering' approach
- The Court itself can provide supportive information that would assist family members to access the Family Links service.
- There are many complex 'systems' within the court / legal / corrections sectors – the Family Links approach provides a 'pathway' to reduce a stressor relating to effects on families.

EVALUATION INPUTS

4.4 SERVICE PARTNER INTERVIEWS

The need to support family members as unintended victims of crime is growing, not diminishing, as a consequence of broad policy shifts in Victoria

- There is a trend that courts have become ‘tougher’ and that the consequence of increased terms and numbers of prisoners is already evident in the public reports of ‘crowding’ in police cells and in prisons
- Changes to the parole system are also affecting increasing duration of prison terms served and, therefore, the overall numbers of prisoners across Victoria
- The unintended consequence of these trends is the increased risk that family members, usually women and children, will experience economic hardship, social isolation and emotional distress. It is possible to argue that the ‘policy driver that “families have rights” is being overlooked by the “tough on crime” lobby’.

The pilot has clearly demonstrated that this form of service assist both families and service providers

Interviewees who had made referrals to the pilot indicated:

- The accessible process of referral is a ‘refreshing’ approach that works because support needs to be delivered in a timely fashion
- Working in collaborative partnership was highly effective as the pilot was able to provide specialist support (for example in court preparation) whilst the referrer got on with providing housing, or drug and alcohol support or case management
- Proactively facing court or the Sheriff with a view to solving problems before they got worse (eg unpaid fines) has been life changing for clients who did not know how to take control of these complex matters
- Workers in community and family services do not have the specialist knowledge of the legal, court and prison system and have traditionally ‘bumbled along’ when assisting clients through court or prison.

4.4.3 Summary

The interviews with key partners have highlighted a clear need for some form of family linkage service that creates informed ‘pathways’ for families as they move through the criminal justice system.

Those people interviewed who have collaborated with the Family Links pilot over the past thirty months have gone further to indicate that the model has several positive attributes:

- The flexible and timely referral process is effective
- The pilot has provided clients with clear information and practical support to navigate both the legal system and the community and family support system to meet their needs
- The practical focus on problem solving is effective: for example the banks and the Sheriff do not want to see families drown in financial chaos and have demonstrated a willingness to work with Family Links clients on satisfactory outcomes
- Family and community workers do not have the detailed knowledge of police, court and prison systems, given the extreme complexity involved, and have appreciated the opportunity to work in partnership with the pilot to support families and achieve outcomes.

BEE IS PROFOUNDLY EXHAUSTED BY A CYCLE OF FAMILY UNHAPPINESS, ADDICTION AND PRISON.

DURING THE GOOD TIMES HER PARTNER, TAYLOR, LOOKS AFTER THE FOUR KIDS WHILST SHE WORKS. HE DOES THE RUNS TO SCHOOL AND KINDER, ALWAYS LOOKING OUT FOR THE LITTLE TACKERS. MONEY IS TIGHT BUT THEY GET BY.

But for Taylor there has been a cycle around every two years where a mysterious addictive itch bubbles to the surface and demands to be scratched – the result is arrest, trial and another prison term.

This stage of the cycle is hard; the cost of childcare alone is crippling. The loneliness, the need to be everything – do everything – for the kids is overwhelming. Fiercely independent, Bee was initially reluctant to receive the support of the VACRO Family Links pilot but the offer of practical and financial assistance could not have come at a lower point for her.

Now, after some years of this cycle Bee is hoping for a brighter future. She is a vocal supporter of the Family Links pilot as she knows from supporting other women with partners in prison that there is a clear need to recognise families as innocent, not guilty, not to be punished, but to be supported to maintain positive and nurturing families. Bee is now convinced that every family in her situation should have access to support services such as the Family Links project.

5. FINDINGS

5.1 FINDINGS

This section of the report outlines a set of evaluated findings, based on the evidence collated. The findings respond to a set of 'inquiries', as follows:

- Has the pilot demonstrated that the Magistrates' Court is a suitable location to identify vulnerable families involved in the criminal justice system?
- Does the 'adult' nature of the criminal justice system affect families? Is there a need for a child centred approach?
- Has the implementation of the pilot demonstrated demand for this form of service?
- Does the model of 'brief intervention' meet the needs as identified by the clients? Is the 'mix' of services appropriate for the client group?
- How has the pilot complemented (rather than competed with) other forms of support for vulnerable families?
- Does the pilot represent value for public investment?

Inquiry	Has the pilot demonstrated that the Magistrates' Court is a suitable location to identify vulnerable families involved in the criminal justice system?
Evidence	<p>The Magistrates' Court is at the centre of services such as the Court Network, solicitors, Legal Aid, the Salvation Army Chaplaincy, Sheriff and Victoria Police. Representatives of these agencies who were interviewed have indicated that the criminal justice system is complex and 'siloed' and that vulnerable families need further assistance.</p> <p>The families interviewed have indicated that the life changing experience of the Court is confronting and that support through the whole journey from arrest to post imprisonment is very valuable.</p> <p>The pilot has developed effective strategies revolving around the Magistrates' Court to manage referrals that target vulnerable families.</p>
Finding	The Magistrates' Court is at the centre of a range of authorities and services. Interaction with the Court is life changing for many families. The Family Links pilot has demonstrated that the Court and its associated services have the capacity to identify and refer family members who are vulnerable and in need of support services.

Inquiry	Does the ‘adult’ nature of the criminal justice system affect families? Is there a need for a child centred approach?
Evidence	<p>It is clear that the criminal justice system is focussed on the person who is ‘defendant’ or ‘prisoner’ – this is a simple necessity.</p> <p>There is certainly no evidence, however, that the criminal justice system is consciously designed to ‘punish families’ – even though that is the perception of many family members. Police, courts and prisons across Victoria are involved in positive initiatives in this area.</p> <p>The descriptor: ‘inadvertent, unintended and innocent victims of crime’ reasonably describes family members, including children, in the context of the criminal justice system.</p> <p>Evidence in literature, through the client interviews and stakeholder consultation clearly demonstrates a need for a child centred approach at each stage: arrest > trial > imprisonment and reunification.</p> <p>There are illustrations for family and child positive initiatives in the Victorian criminal justice system but the need for a co-ordinated, considered child centred approach is clear.</p>
Finding	The need for child centred approaches within the criminal justice system is clear if risks to children and families are to be reduced. The Family Links model demonstrates the benefits of taking a child and family centred approach and is a significant contribution to initiatives taking place across the State.
Inquiry	Has the implementation of the pilot demonstrated demand for this form of service?
Evidence	<p>The figures from the Geelong Magistrates’ Court indicate that around 30 people per month (average age 32 years, predominantly male) are sentenced to an average of 3+ months in prison.</p> <p>Based on this figure and an estimated rate of parenting the overall picture of demand is significant: some 165 families per year, linked to the Geelong Court alone, are involved in the journey from arrest, trial and imprisonment. Experience of the pilot demonstrates that a significant number of these families will be living with a range of complex risk factors and that children are at risk of cumulative harm.</p> <p>The Family Links pilot has not experienced any time in the thirty months of the pilot where there has been a shortage of referrals. This includes the initial period where the service was focussing on promoting the pilot and establishing administrative and management structures.</p> <p>In the last year of the pilot period a pattern of more formal referrals has emerged as the service has ‘bedded down’. Representatives from family and community services have indicated a high correlation between housing, drug and alcohol services and child protection and the criminal justice system; which indicates that any further promotion of the service would result in more referrals.</p> <p>Family members have indicated that they would not hesitate to recommend the service to any other families involved in the criminal justice system.</p>
Finding	There is a clearly demonstrated demand for the Family Links program as the pilot has identified two key drivers of demand: the high levels of vulnerability within the families attending Court and the overall rate of imprisonment of adults who are in caring / parenting roles. The estimate of 50% parenting rate for prisoners supports this finding.

5.1 FINDINGS

<p>Inquiry</p>	<p>Does the model of ‘brief intervention’ meet the needs as identified by the clients? Is the ‘mix’ of services appropriate for the client group?</p>
<p>Evidence</p>	<p>The pilot has delivered services to families in a wide range of circumstances: some families are quite unfamiliar with the criminal justice system whilst others are experienced. At any point in this spectrum, however, the significant majority of families have indicated that they do not seek a long term service intervention.</p> <p>Families are clearly confounded by the complexity and opacity of the criminal justice system and seek practical information (for example to locate a prisoner), practical support (for example how to dress and act in Court), financial assistance and emotional support.</p> <p>Family and community support workers have indicated that the ‘mix’ and timeliness of support services from the Family Links service has added considerable value to their ability to deliver their role. This has been a significant support to families.</p> <p>The brief intervention approach also reinforces the overall strength based approach to providing support services to vulnerable families.</p> <p>The families interviewed were highly complimentary of the service and have noted that it met their need at that point of their journey.</p>
<p>Finding</p>	<p>The Family Links pilot has developed an effective brief intervention model which is focussed on problem solving and resilience within families. The service reduces risk of family violence, cumulative harm to children, financial and housing stress whilst improving links to specialist services.</p>
<p>Inquiry</p>	<p>How has the pilot complemented (rather than competed with) other forms of support for vulnerable families?</p>
<p>Evidence</p>	<p>The Family Links service has successfully developed partnerships that complement other services.</p> <p>The Court Network exists to support a large number of people in the very moment of their participation in the Court. It is beyond the scope of Court Network to ‘follow up’ any clients. The Geelong Court Network staff now receive feedback on the work being undertaken by Family Links and have expressed relief that families are being further supported.</p> <p>Family and community support workers have indicated that working in shared care enabled them to focus on their core task in the knowledge that a comprehensive information and support service relating to the criminal justice system is in place.</p> <p>Authorities such as Police and the Sheriff have indicated that the Family Links model is a unique approach to proactively supporting families (who may avoid problems such as unpaid fines) to re-consider their situation and take more control of their circumstances and commitments.</p>
<p>Finding</p>	<p>The Family Links model does not duplicate or compete with any other service. The pilot has demonstrated that the model links services and systems that are otherwise ‘siloes’ and / or complex and opaque. The model focusses on solutions that work across service systems with flexibility and creativity.</p>

Inquiry	Does the pilot represent value for public investment?
Evidence	<p>The Family Links model is based on the availability of a highly skilled and well supported case worker, who has connections to the criminal justice system through an agency such as VACRO.</p> <p>This case worker then works in partnership with other service providers and authorities to assess the needs of vulnerable families and identify action that will assist them to strengthen their resilience. In terms of cost this is measured as the annual salary of a supported case worker.</p> <p>The real and immediate value for the public is on the other side of the ledger. The pilot, even in this initial period has demonstrably averted significant cost to the community by ‘solving problems’ that could have resulted in higher levels of criminality, family violence, homelessness, mental illness, intergenerational crime and child protection.</p> <p>The costs of early school leaving or emergency accommodation for a family or inpatient mental health treatment for example is exponentially higher than the costs of a Family Links case worker. The value to the public has been clearly demonstrated within this pilot period.</p>
Finding	<p>The Family Links model has demonstrated value for public investment through proactive and timely intervention and support for vulnerable families. It seems reasonable to assume that the cost of a case worker is readily offset by the averted costs of resource intensive interventions such as family court, emergency housing, tertiary physical and mental health and child protection. In addition, it is reasonable to assume that the model makes a positive contribution to the reduction of intergenerational crime.</p>



It’s lonely, like at night when finally the kids are in bed and I can get to REALLY worry about the bills and everything. I would have been a mess by now without VACRO.”



6. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 A STATE-WIDE MODEL

The philanthropically funded pilot of a court based family support service has been successful in the Geelong Family Links pilot.

This section of the report focusses on recommendations for future action.

The context for future action is connected to two drivers of change across Victoria:

- The family violence agenda
- Innovation in the criminal justice system

6.1.1 The family violence agenda

The current focus on identifying further approaches to addressing family violence is both significant and urgent.

One of the structural challenges to family violence support services has been the very clear but reactive pathway to support. This pathway generally involves the identification of vulnerable families where violence has already occurred.

The Family Links model has demonstrated the capacity to complement family support services by providing an additional pathway. It has been very clear that Family Links clients are members of families where significant vulnerability is present. This second, somewhat more proactive, pathway delivers community safety, focusses on the best interests of the child and provides practical solutions to families that strengthen knowledge and resilience.

There may be opportunities to consider the Family Links models during the re-design of family support, ChildFIRST, Services Connect and family violence service systems across the state.

It may be possible for some connection between the development of the Family Links model and the initiative to expand the RAMP (Risk Assessment and Management Panel) approach from the two pilot projects (Geelong and Hume) to a state-wide initiative. The successful RAMP model has demonstrated the advantages of cross agency collaboration using a well-established and shared Common Risk Assessment Framework.

6.1.2 Innovation in the criminal justice system

This is a significant period in the development of the criminal justice system in Victoria, given the expansion of the Court Integrated Services Program (CISP).

The CISP program has been operational since 2007 and ‘offers a coordinated team-based approach to the assessment and treatment of defendants at the pre-trial or bail stage. It provides case management support and links defendants to support services such as drug and alcohol treatment, crisis accommodation, disability services and mental health services.’³ The program has been operating in Melbourne, Sunshine and the LaTrobe Valley to date. The Victorian State Government has invested in the expansion of the Court Integrated Services Program, providing \$7.1 million over three years as part of the Family Violence Fund. It is anticipated that this increased funding will enable an expansion of the program to other Courts within Victoria.

There may be some future opportunity to create formal programmatic links between the Family Links model and CISP including the possible co-location of the CISP and VACRO Family Links programs in order to provide a coordinated service to defendants and members of their families. Whilst the two services would retain eligibility, screening and assessment it seems reasonable to assume the possibility for:

- Clear and effective referral mechanisms
- Some service cross-over, enabling effective shared care – where family members and the defendant receive supports identified and planned through a holistic joint assessment
- Expanding understanding of the community, therapeutic and family supports available in the location
- Clear program promotion to assist referrers, family members and defendants to be aware of available services and the routes by which they can be accessed.

This possible interrelationship may be summarised as:

Feature	CISP	Family Links
Primary ‘target’ clients	Defendants	Family members
Services provided	Case management & links to supports	Emotional & practical support and information re both the criminal justice system & family community support
Primary objectives	Improve outcomes for defendants: treatment, court, sentence and re-offending	Resilience of families; early access to appropriate supports, informed response to journey through criminal justice system

³. *Court Integrated Services Program Tackling the causes of crime. Executive Summary Evaluation Report*. Courts and Tribunals Unit, Department of Justice, Melbourne 2010.

RECOMMENDATIONS

6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

This evaluation process has found that the Family Links model piloted by VACRO in Geelong has successfully demonstrated capacity to:

- Use the Magistrates' Court as a hub to identify vulnerable families where a family member is involved in the criminal justice system
- Apply a set of screening and assessment tools to ensure service provision is matched to needs either within the criminal justice system or via specialist family and community supports
- Provide information, practical and emotional supports in a time-limited service that builds capacity and resilience within families
- Support families to manage this difficult period in their lives
- Add value to other services in the region.

This evaluation recommends:

1. That VACRO acknowledge the philanthropic funders who have supported this successful pilot period
2. That VACRO approach the Victorian State Government to promote the Family Links model; the outcomes of the pilot period and opportunities for state-wide implementation
3. That the Victorian State Government consider the VACRO Family Links model as an effective means to strengthen both the criminal justice systems and the family support systems across Victoria.

These recommendations are accompanied by a sense of urgency. The challenges to providing effective responses to family violence, intergenerational crime and harm to children are great. The Family Links model provides the Victorian criminal justice system and human services system with a blue print for the development and implementation of a support service that may be of international significance.

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