

Northern Territory Productivity Commission

The National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) is Australia's first secular not-for-profit to focus entirely on the prevention of child abuse and neglect before it starts. NAPCAN has been operating in the Northern Territory for over 17 years, working to build the capacity of individuals, agencies and communities to keep children safe and help them to thrive. NAPCAN has achieved this through:

1. the development of tools and resources to promote child rights; create child friendly and safe practices; and improve communication with children about matters impacting on them.
2. support and guidance to organisations to improve policies, procedures and practices to keep children and young people safe
3. Development and delivery of a range of Workshops including Preventing Child Abuse; Preventing Violence in Families; Creating Safe Communities for Children; Child Safe Organisations; Positive Parenting; 7 Steps to Safety; and Tools and Resources to talk with Families about Child Safety and Wellbeing
4. Promoting the rights of children and young people at forums, conferences and events
5. Coordination of National Child Protection Week and Children's Week across the NT
6. Development and delivery of Respectful Relationships Programs
7. Development and delivery of Protective Behaviours Programs

Barriers to prevention initiatives in the Northern Territory

Confusion regarding the term "prevention"

Throughout the NT, and nationally, there is a lack of clarity and consistency in the language used to describe child abuse prevention. Confusion exists because there are different stages of prevention: primary (or universal), secondary (or targeted), and tertiary (or crisis). Primary prevention is focussed on the protective factors to reduce the risk of abuse and neglect, whereas secondary and tertiary prevention has a focus on the risk factors that increase the likelihood of abuse and neglect occurring.

To ensure the sector and broader community are speaking the same language when it comes to prevention, NAPCAN has established the NT Prevention Alliance for Children, Families and Communities (see Appendix A for draft Terms of Reference). The first meeting took place in July 2019, consisting of peak bodies providing advocacy, funding and services for the safety and wellbeing of families, children and young people throughout the NT. The aim of the Alliance is to engage government and non-government sectors to put prevention of child abuse and neglect firmly on the NT agenda.

NAPCAN collaborated with the NT Government to write a Prevention Framework: A guide for creating a child safe and friendly Australia" (formerly known as the NT Child Safety and Wellbeing Framework) (Appendix B). The initial intention was to launch the co-written Framework, however the NT Government has delayed the launch indefinitely and made allowances for NAPCAN to launch and rebrand a version of the document. The Framework defines the different elements of prevention to provide guidance to Australians on how different sectors, communities and individuals can work together to protect children from harm.

Coordination of services

NAPCAN's work in major centres, rural towns and in remote communities over the past decade has consistently found a lack of cohesion around the funding and delivery of services by federal, state and local governments and the not for profit sector. NAPCAN has observed that the role of Local Councils, the major provider of services to children and young people in the most remote regions in the Northern Territory, are rarely referred to in discussions relating to service provision and service coordination. This is a serious omission that occurs consistently in Territory and Federal Government planning, reports and frameworks.

In remote communities there is no agreed process for advising the community about organisations planning to visit or deliver programs and services. As a result, staff and families often do not find out about much needed supports, information and training opportunities.

Training needs

Staff working in remote communities across the NT are often lack the necessary skills and do not have the relevant experience to work with highly traumatised children, young people and their families. It is essential that government strives to attract skilled professionals and provide the relevant professional supports and training to support the sector to work in areas with such complex issues.

Evidence, research and funding cycles

In regards to evidence of programming and services, there has been a clear shift to fund evidence-based services but no commitment to fund services to be evaluated. The lack of funding made available to evaluate prevention programs currently operating in the NT and across Australia has been the biggest barrier to developing an evidence base of effective initiatives.

Numerous prevention programs throughout the NT are funded on a discontinuous basis. This poses a significant risk, especially in the NT context where in small communities even minor changes to staff or funding can leave programs vulnerable unless there is ongoing funding.

An example of one such program is NAPCAN's respectful relationships program, Love Bites, which has been operating in the NT for over a decade and has been invested in numerous times by governments, however this funding has been intermittent. This inconsistency in funding conflicts with best practice which stresses that long-term commitment to prevention programming, which is essential in order to achieve generational change.

In order to achieve this change, governments would be better positioned to invest in a long-term funding approach and a thorough evaluation of the program. Love Bites is currently unfunded, however continues to be sustained across numerous regions through a fee for service model and the demand from communities for the program is constant.

There would be great value in providing a component for evaluation in all prevention funding agreements and to provide access to evaluation resources, skills and support, particularly for smaller organisations.

Community education

Apart from NAPCAN's work (which equates to 1 and ½ FTE of funding) and the support of NAPCAN's National Child Protection Week campaign (not funded by the NT government), there is no strategic approach by government to educate communities that the safety and wellbeing of children is a collective responsibility.

The need for long term community education and social marketing campaigns has been emphasised through numerous child protection inquiries, royal commissions and reviews yet there has been none undertaken aside from NAPCAN's National Child Protection Week. Other 'weeks' remain unconnected to ongoing actions. Campaigns can promote access to services and create greater awareness around ways individuals, organisations and communities can take actions to provide safe and nurturing environments for children and reduce the risk of harm.

Conclusion

In order to break down the barriers to preventing child abuse and neglect in the Northern Territory, it is fundamental that:

- There is clarity and consistency in the language used to describe child abuse prevention
- The funding and delivery of prevention services by local, state and federal governments (across health, education, child protection, community sectors and housing) is coordinated
- Funding for prevention initiatives is prioritised and allows for long term evaluation.

This will ultimately reduce demand on the child protection system and enable funding to be allocated to prevention programs and initiatives to increase the capacity of communities to support families in raising their children.

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