The family referral service

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The Family Referral Service (FRS) is a key initiative of the NSW Keep Them Safe child protection reform agenda funded by the NSW Ministry of Health. Keep Them Safe: A Shared Approach to Child Wellbeing is the NSW Government’s response to the Commission into Child Protection in NSW lead by Justice James Wood and is a 5-year plan to improve the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people. A key part of Keep Them Safe is the improvement of universal services and collaboration between organisations.

The FRS was a direct recommendation of Justice James Wood and commenced operation in May 2010. The Family Referral Service engages with families that do not meet the statutory threshold of ‘risk of significant harm’. Through assessment and referral to services and supports the FRS works with families, children and young people to increase strengths and capacity and reduce the risk of escalation of risks and vulnerabilities.

The FRS commenced with three pilot services in Newcastle, Dubbo and Mt Druitt. Since this time a further five services have commenced and the program is now rolled out across eight regions within NSW. Family Referral Services offer an augmented service model with both telephone and outreach services.

The FRS engages with vulnerable families, children and young people with the objective of developing referrals plans and connections with targeted services and supports in order to provide early intervention and prevent escalation to a statutory response. The Family Referral Service provides a coordinated and collaborative approach to assist in the promotion and provision of child safety, welfare and wellbeing between both government and non-government agencies.

Drawing on the Benevolent Society’s experience in implementing the FRS across three sites in NSW, and using both qualitative and quantitative data, this presentation will explore:

- learnings regarding service models and service implementation, including developing and implementing a best-practice service model while providing a localised response to communities
- challenges of working in regional and rural areas, including access to services in rural and remote locations, location of service providers and frequency of outreach
- working collaboratively with partner agencies to provide culturally safe services and having a flexible service delivery model to provide responses in line with community needs.