



Connect 2.0

Volunteer Family Connect

Trailblazer for children and families

Overview

We welcome the opportunity to provide our revised submission to Commonwealth Government Treasury for consideration in the next Federal Budget. Through this submission, the Benevolent Society, Karitane, Save the Children and Western Sydney University (The VFC Consortium) are seeking funding to support continued delivery, training and impact evaluation of the evidence-based volunteer program “Volunteer Family Connect” (VFC) that will reduce the service gap that exists in the Children and Families service system.

VFC promotes social and community connection to support child and family health and wellbeing. It is an evidence based, cost-effective, sustainable and scalable intervention and highly aligned to the emerging COVID-19 & beyond family policy reform agenda. VFC fits seamlessly into the prevention and early intervention service continuum and fills a critical gap between low intensity programs such as playgroups and higher intensity programs such as professional intensive family services. In doing so, VFC plays a critical step up and step down role along the continuum of care for vulnerable families. During the COVID-19 pandemic and following on from the bushfires and drought for many regions in Australia, there is a sharp increase in demand for provision of support to families with young children who are doing it tough, and who have little or no social support.

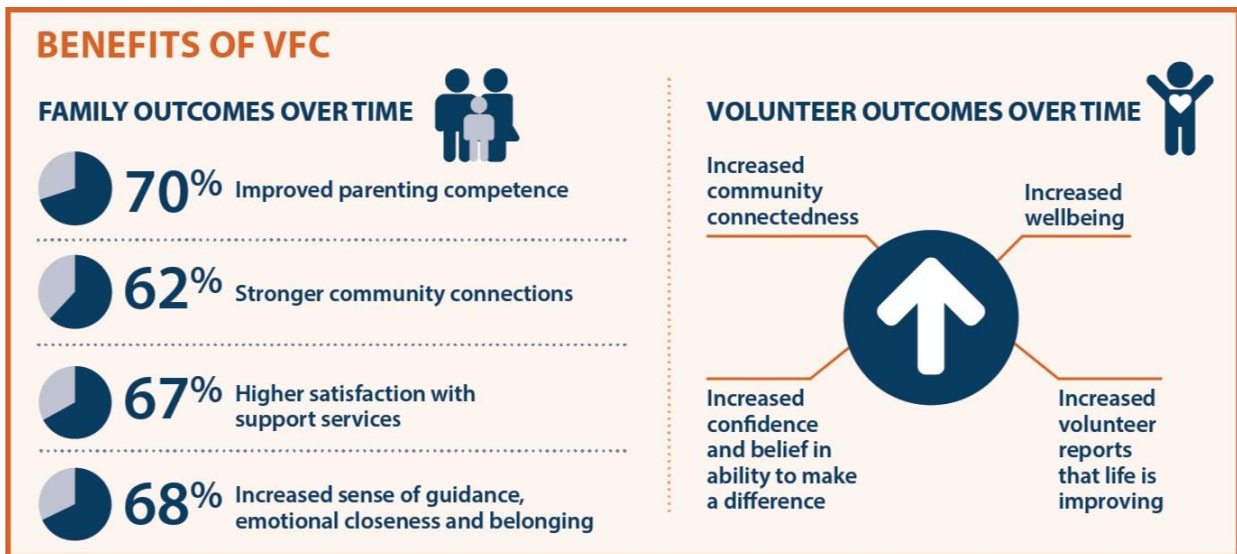
A second major component of VFC is the structured training program for volunteers. During COVID-19, this training has now been further adapted by Western Sydney University and is available online, meaning that core modules can be completed by the volunteer in their own time.

Thirdly, VFC offers a foundational underpinning framework for evidence-based volunteer training and home visiting which has the capacity to extend to other vulnerable cohorts in overcoming social isolation such as in the disability and aged care sectors. This broader scalability application of VFC is currently being co-designed by the Consortium and is referred to as **Connect 2.0** for the purpose of this submission.

Connect 2.0 proposes VFC as a “Trailblazer” model that demonstrates how, regardless of differences in structures, focus and working cultures, organisations can connect and collaborate with government on issues of shared interest. In this case, supporting vulnerable communities and reducing social isolation through evidence-based volunteer home visiting.

Volunteer Family Connect “Trailblazer” evidence-based model

Led by Western Sydney University (WSU), the largest randomised controlled trial (RCT) of volunteer home visiting (VFC) to be conducted worldwide, confirmed that VFC is highly effective in supporting vulnerable families with moderate needs that are too complex for universal services, but below the threshold for specialist or intensive services.



The evidence is unequivocal that safe, responsive relationships with parents and caregivers is critical to healthy child development as are strong relationships between support workers and their adult clients¹. Parental social isolation is also recognised in research as a significant risk factor for poor child outcomes – and as many as 1 in 4 report low levels of social support.

That is why VFC works with vulnerable families in the early years to achieve and measure change in three key activity areas:

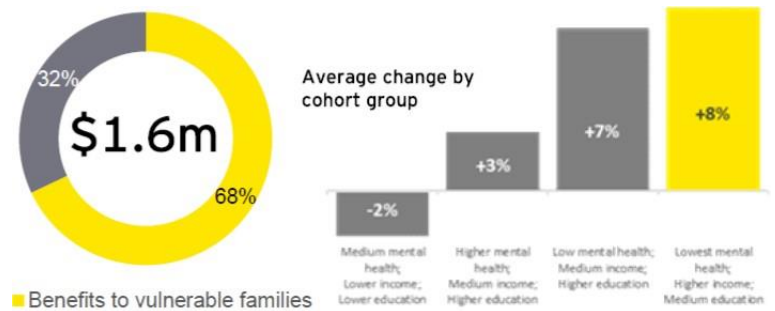
1. Increased parenting skills, competence and confidence, through practical and emotional support, modelling positive interactions and establishing meaningful family routines;
2. Reduced parental social isolation through structured social relationships, helping families connect with local community networks, and referrals as required to wider services; and
3. Increased community connectedness by mobilising and training local volunteers to support the most vulnerable in their suburb or town.

“My home visitor has been well matched to my personality, is great with my kids and I look forward to my weekly visit. It has got me out of the house more and provided me with resources that cater to my family’s needs”

¹ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2017). Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>

Value for money

In 2019, the partners of **Connect 2.0** commissioned Ernst & Young to undertake a Social Impact Evaluation, which found that VFC has an average social return on investment (SROI) of \$1.78 for every \$1 invested. This demonstrated impressive value for money, with nearly \$1.6 million in social benefits over ten years against a cost of \$900,000 in the same time frame. This included almost \$800,000 in avoided costs to Governments, and the same again in quantifiable benefits for parents and carers. Almost 30% per cent of the RCT cohort of families was highly vulnerable and returned an increased value of almost \$5.50 for every \$1 invested. This was also the RCT cohort that experienced the most improvement over time as a result of VFC participation.



Ongoing commitment to training, evaluation and impact

VFC volunteers are recruited, assessed, trained and supported by trained VFC Program Coordinators who are employed by each of the three founding partners in the service consortium.

The VFC training package is comprehensive and standardized with online and face to face modules and is available to all current and future service providers.

Trained VFC volunteers provide practical and emotional support for parents, foster parent-child bonding, and help families connect with their local communities and support services.

The randomized control trial ran between 2015-2018 and during that time VFC has supported over 1,600 families across Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania.

How the VFC program works

Families can access the program themselves, or be referred by services, including GPs, child and family health nurses and social workers.

On intake, families are connected and matched with local trained volunteers who typically visit for two to three hours per week over a period of three to twelve months, assisting parents to build their resilience and confidence as caregivers, and wider connections to community. Volunteers also facilitate interagency support and referrals as required.

VFC targets vulnerable families with one or more children aged 0-5 who have not been screened into the child protection system or are not eligible for other funded one-one intensive family support – bridging a critical service gap.

COVID-19 VFC adaptation

Since the beginning of 2020, in response to COVID-19, VFC providers have adapted both training and service to online and virtual delivery. Since March 2020, families have remained socially connected with their community volunteers over the phone or through “virtual” home visits using video conferencing and other online platforms, and volunteer training has been delivered using video conferencing.

Through partnership with Western Sydney University the core modules of training are now presented online and can be completed by the volunteer in their own time. Follow up virtual or face to face sessions are organized to complete training and check comprehension.

The **core modules** are supported by additional training that gives focus to working with particular population groups more likely to experience isolation or adversity, including (1) families with infants and young children; (2) people with disabilities; (3) ageing populations, (4) people with mental health challenges; (5) people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; (6) people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; and (7) grandparent carers.

The online training provides the strong foundational knowledge required for safe and well-trained community volunteers who will provide effective support to members of the community who are experiencing isolation or adversity.

Connect 2.0 Consortia and VFC Trailblazer Service Providers

The founding **Connect 2.0** organisations are Karitane, Benevolent Society & Save The Children and are highly experienced community, child and family services providers who have been collaborating successfully since 2012 to develop, test and continuously improve VFC across Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania. With the generous support of philanthropy and university partners, the Consortia Partners built the VFC program and are delivering this program across all eastern states funded with the support of a generous donor.

In addition, as a System Connector the Connect 2.0 consortia have already begun scaling evidence-based volunteer home visiting in two ways:

1. Expansion of VFC in other locations and new partners
 - Benevolent society – early intervention for young children with a disability in Logan and Brisbane
 - Karitane, First Steps Count , Biripi Aboriginal Corporation – Aboriginal VFC, Taree
2. Expansion of evidence-based home visiting into other cohorts
 - Carers in the community - Benevolent Society – Carers Connect



Recommendation

1. Invest \$1.6million per year for Volunteer Family Connect to be delivered to socially, vulnerable children and families across the existing 7 sites in NSW, Victoria, Tasmania & Queensland.

This submission seeks funding of **\$4.8m over three years** to

- Continue delivery of VFC in the existing seven sites, maintaining early support for families living in social isolation. A seamless transition from philanthropic funding (expiring end 2020) would minimise inefficiencies from volunteer attrition, ensure continuity of service, and maintain strong governance and quality arrangements.
 - Provide training, including online training for new volunteer cohorts over the next 3 year
 - Provide ongoing evaluation, quality improvement and knowledge translation.
2. Additional to the annual service delivery investment above, a one-off funding allocation of \$50 000 is sought to automate the monitoring and quality management system, which is used to collect data from volunteers and clients.

The consortia seeks to develop a software application to support these essential quality and knowledge management elements. This allocation will enable engagement of a business analyst to assist in identifying the business requirements and specifications, as well as funding to build a suitable application if there is no 'out of the box' solution available. Development of a user-friendly interface to collect and report on volunteer and client data and outcomes is a core requirement to enable further expansion of volunteer programs as envisioned by the Connect 2.0 partners.

3. The Government continues further engagement with the Consortia to deliver a scaling option to other sites and to take the evidenced-based VFC into other sectors that could benefit.
 - i) A second stage plan, drawing on the learnings of VFC, the **Connect 2.0** consortium partners propose scaling this low-cost, high impact model into further sites across the country, and connect more systemically into the service continuum. Existing providers have demonstrated experience in successfully scaling up evidence-based services, and the VFC training package is comprehensive and standardised, ready for expansion by any future human services delivery partner.
 - ii) A third stage plan is the co-design of a new or re-focused program and performance framework which extends the tried and tested VFC program across other vulnerable cohorts e.g. volunteer program to support families with children with disabilities, elderly community members, refugees.



Karitane has over 97 years of experience providing help and advice to parents and families during the early years of parenting. Karitane delivers VFC in Fairfield and Macarthur in NSW.



The Benevolent Society (TBS) is Australia's first charity, founded over 200 years ago with a vision of a just society where all Australians can live their best life. TBS delivers VFC in South East Sydney and the Gold Coast.



University of Western Sydney have provided academic rigour and oversight of the VFC randomised control trial (RCT) and provide ongoing quality impact evaluation through longitudinal research. The University has taken the lead on the construction of the core online training modules for volunteering.



Save the Children (SCA) has been working in Australia for 100 years to make sure all children and young people are set up for success, servicing over 200 remote, regional and metropolitan areas in 2019. SCA delivers VFC in Inner Sydney, East Gippsland, and Hobart.

