

# **THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA**

Report by – SARAH WAYLAND – 2005 Churchill fellow

**THE PETER MITCHELL CHURCHILL FELLOWSHIP to study the international approach to counselling for unresolved loss relating to families of missing persons**

*“Each day when I wake up I don’t think it’s another day that I haven’t seen my daughter; I think that it’s another day closer to her coming home”*

**Colleen Nick, Morgan Nick Foundation NCMEC Conference 2006**

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Signed:

Dated:

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## INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Every year in Australia 30000 reports are made to the Police about concerns for the safety and wellbeing of a person – a missing person. For every individual whose whereabouts are unknown a multitude of people are devastated by the torment of ‘not knowing’.

Three years ago I accepted a Counselling position with the Attorney General's Department of NSW, Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit – the only position of its kind in Australia. I have found it challenging to conceptualise what it would mean to live with unresolved loss. No matter how hard you looked, no matter what questions you asked, sometimes we just don't know where people go when they vanish.

My aim in travelling to other countries was to investigate how unresolved loss is approached – is Australia doing what it can to make people feel supported while they search, can we learn new ways to minimise the anguish?

Firstly, I would like to show gratitude to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and in particular the family of Peter Mitchell for giving me such a wonderful opportunity and for acknowledging that the support needs of families of Missing Persons was worthy of further exploration. I would also like to acknowledge the Attorney General's Department of NSW for providing me with study leave to assist in further developing the expertise within the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit.

I would like to thank the agencies in the United States, Canada, England and Ireland who gave me their time and joined with me in discussing how they helped to bridge the divide created by ambiguous loss. In particular I would like to show appreciation to Professor Pauline Boss - thank you for your rich conversations, your guidance and your support in listening to my ideas; it was one of the most inspiring weeks of my professional life.

I would like to thank my family for their absolute encouragement and my mum for being the best international babysitter a new mum could ask for.

I would also like to express my gratitude to all of the families I have met during my time at Missing Persons – your stories started me on a journey that has at times been inescapable. I hope that the information and ideas I have presented within this report acknowledge the strength and resilience you continue to show on a daily basis.

Lastly, thank you to my little Poppy - there is nothing ambiguous about you!

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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The Churchill Fellowship was undertaken between August and October 2006 travelling to the USA, Canada, England and Ireland to investigate the international approach to counselling for unresolved loss relating to families of Missing Persons. Particular emphasis was given to developing a framework of appropriate intervention for counsellors who have contact with families of Missing Persons. The Fellowship also explored international support services for families such as online support groups, family gatherings and services established by families *for* families.

### **Highlights**

- One-week intensive collaboration with Professor Emeritus Pauline Boss, University of Minnesota, resulting in the development of a counselling Framework entitled 'Five themes for working with Families of Missing Persons'.
- Learning from staff at the National Center for Missing Adults, USA, about their role in locating 10000 displaced persons resulting from Hurricane Katrina.
- Participating in a two-day conference at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Virginia USA.
- Listening to the lessons learnt from families of Missing Persons who establish support agencies –being proactive about changing the experiences for others whilst being careful not to re-traumatise themselves.
- Experiencing the many benefits of non-Police tracing agencies and non- profit organisations who work tirelessly in their efforts to support families.

### **Recommendations**

- Establishment of specialised support services across Australia to assist those experiencing unresolved loss as a result of having a loved one disappear.
- Development of an online support group for families of Missing Persons.
- Introduction and recognition of the concepts of unresolved loss and the risk factor of 'missing' to agencies that may come in contact with those at risk of disappearing, as well as those with contact with the families that are left behind.
- Inclusion of the concept of unresolved loss within the grief module of undergraduate degrees or diplomas to further expand the knowledge and skill set of Counsellors in the Australian Community.

### **Implementation and dissemination**

- Following the completion of 'Five themes for working with Families of Missing Persons' in late 2007 training for relevant Health Care professionals will begin.
- Knowledge will be disseminated through State and Federal Agencies by involvement in Seminars, Conferences and the production of Journal articles to highlight the ongoing support needs of those affected by unresolved loss.

## Fellowship Program

### United States of America

**Pauline Boss**

**Emeritus Professor**  
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[www.umn.edu](http://www.umn.edu)

**Nancy Sabin  
Alison Feigh**

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**Kym Pasqualini  
Erin Bruno**

**Chief Executive Officer  
Director of Case Management**  
National Center for Missing Adults  
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**Katrina Josytewa**

**Aunt of missing adult Ira Josytewa**  
Phoenix Arizona

[http://www.theyaremissd.org/ncma/gallery/ncmaprofile\\_all.php?A200301002W](http://www.theyaremissd.org/ncma/gallery/ncmaprofile_all.php?A200301002W)

**Abby Potash  
Cristina Fernandez  
Charles Pickett  
Peter D Banks**

**Program Manager Team HOPE  
Supervisor, Exploited Child Unit  
Senior Case Manager  
Director of Training and Outreach**

National Centre for Missing and Exploited  
Children  
Alexandria  
Virginia  
[www.missingkids.com](http://www.missingkids.com)

## Canada

**Pierre-Hugues Boisvenu**

**President**

Association des Families de Personnes  
Assassins ou Disaparues  
Murdered or Missing Persons Families  
Association  
Sherbrooke  
Quebec  
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**Pina Arcamone**

**Director General**

Enfants Retour  
Missing Children's Network Canada  
Westmount, Quebec  
[www.missingchildren.ca](http://www.missingchildren.ca)

## England

**Sash Newman  
Paul Tuohy**

**Head of Services**

**Chief Executive Officer**

National Missing Persons Helpline  
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[www.missingpersons.org](http://www.missingpersons.org)

## Ireland

**Dermot Browne**

**Chairperson**

Missing In Ireland Support Services  
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## Section One

### **Unresolved loss: Developing a Framework for support of Families of Missing Persons in Australia.**

The limited number of Health Professionals working in the field of Missing Persons support is hindered by a lack of available literature about the specific therapeutic needs of those who are left behind when a loved one vanishes. The primary focus of my fellowship was to begin the development of a framework for support to assist counselors in understanding ways in which they could work with Families of Missing Persons. The result of my conversations with Professor Pauline Boss is 'Five themes for working with Families of Missing Persons' – a document that will assist in acknowledging the dearth of literature in the field of unresolved loss within the Australian Community.

Professor Emeritus, Pauline Boss, Department of Family Social Science, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus USA, discovered the concept 'Ambiguous Loss' in the 1970's and has worked as a therapist in the field of physical and psychological missing<sup>1</sup> for over three decades. Pauline was instrumental in the provision of support to Families left behind following the September 11 attacks in New York City.

'Five themes for working with Families of Missing Persons' was developed during my discussions with her. At present there is no relevant model of counselling that allows practitioners to explore the specific needs of families left behind. Typically families have had to access generic or grief counselling support, which did not take into account the long-term ramifications of unresolved loss and the ambiguity when a missing person's location remains unknown. The framework will assist in the development of a relevant model of counselling for workers to incorporate in their provision of support for families.

The five key themes are not mutually exclusive; they overlap depending on the needs expressed by the family or the status of the missing person's investigation.

The overarching theme of the document is to educate professionals to support families – supporting the ambiguous nature of missing as well as the uncertainty of how to live with 'not knowing'.

Below is a brief outline of the 'Five themes for working with families of Missing Persons'. The titles of the theme reflect the processes I have observed in working with families for the last 3 years. I would also like to acknowledge Bernie Brown, previous incumbent counsellor - Missing Persons, for his collaborative input in preparation for my trip overseas.

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<sup>1</sup> *Psychological missing* 'a loved one is present but his or her mind is not' Boss P (2002)

## **Five Themes for working with Families of Missing Persons**

### **Reanimation**

When a person disappears families often speak of being frozen or 'stuck' to the time of the disappearance. The counsellor's role is to explore with families the paradox of both absence and presence, of the Missing Person being 'both here and gone'. In the absence of information families are unsure whether to grieve the loss or wait for the person's return.

In order to 'reanimate' the lives of those affected by unresolved loss the counsellor must begin a process of supporting families to move forward, rather than moving on. If a loss is unresolved it is helpful for families to feel that in moving forward they can take the memories and the hope that the missing person will return, with them. Some ways this 'reanimation' can be explored include:

- Share what has helped other families as a way of normalising the experience of unresolved loss.
- Acknowledge that the sense of being frozen is caused by an external factor (i.e. the incidence of missing) rather than an internal weakness
- Incorporate the use of family gatherings to generate discussion and to facilitate family members to share what the loss has meant for them. 'Our overall goal from the first meeting to the most recent was to create a community from which the families of missing could draw strength to regain resilience'<sup>2</sup>
- Explore the concepts of hope through the families' journey as a way of assessing change. Family members of missing persons have spoken about revising the concepts of hope along their journey. A daughter of a mother missing for over thirty years spoke of "definition of hope has changed from 'hope of a reunion, to hope of information, which finally became hope of resolution'"<sup>3</sup>

### **A celebration so far**

When a person disappears families can feel alienated by the community as there is no mechanism for them to acknowledge their loss. In death we have the rituals of funeral, cremation or burial as well as the embracing of the emotions triggered by the loss.

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<sup>2</sup> Boss P et al (2003)

<sup>3</sup> Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (2005)

Unresolved loss does not have any rituals that allow families to express the impact of their trauma. Due to the ambiguity of unresolved loss families are often reluctant to hold remembrance services for fear that this may suggest that they have given up hope.

In counselling families may wish to explore the concept of ritual in the process of unresolved loss. This exploration has been renamed “a celebration so far” – the naming suggests to the family that they can reclaim the missing person as a person - their identity is not just that they are missing.

“So far” also allows families to acknowledge that they are *currently* experiencing the loss of a loved one. Identifying the loss as being “so far” does not force families to concede that the person may not return.

Timing of a celebration **must** be client directed. Suggesting that families celebrate the missing person too soon into their experience may be counter-productive. Some families have spoken to me about celebrations feeling like memorial services, a public recognition that they have ‘given up’ hope.

Celebrations do not have to be specific events but can be incorporated into daily life – taking some time to play a favourite song, cooking a person’s favourite meal or by simply stopping and remembering. Acknowledging special dates within the ‘celebration so far’ may be multifaceted. I have witnessed a range of celebratory acts whilst supporting families of missing persons – ‘drop in’ picnics that invite people to bring special memories of the missing person, creating an altar to give the missing person a prominent position in the home, a photographic collage of the relationship between the family and the missing person or even relaxing and drinking a brother’s favourite drink...a multitude of celebrations that can generate some creative links between the family and the missing person.

Michael White’s idea of “saying hello again” to a lost loved one is a useful tool for counsellors to include in their intervention. White explained that these conversations were the “reincorporating of the person’s relationships with the lost loved one, conversations that contributed to making available to persons, in their day-to-day lives, experiences of the touch and voices of the lost loved ones”<sup>4</sup>

Supporting families to take control of the ways in which they acknowledge the loss of a loved one may create some structure in the midst of the ambiguity they are experiencing.

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<sup>4</sup> White, M (1997)

## **The trauma timeline**

Loss often triggers thoughts and emotions evoked by previous traumas. The way in which a person navigates unresolved loss is often influenced by the previous stresses they have experienced.

Counsellors can assist in helping families to visually map the effects of their unresolved loss by looking to the past, focussing on the present and pondering the impact of the loss on their future. Looking to the future helps families deal with ambiguity, as they may be able to predict ways in which they may cope if the loss remains unresolved.

Using a whiteboard or a large piece of paper the counsellor can help families plot their development across a timeline that acknowledges family or origin issues, their relationship with their missing family member and some ideas for moving forward. Using the timeline as a tool within the session helps to also plot the family's therapeutic 'movement' during the counselling relationship.

Loss and change are intrinsically linked. Supporting families to explore the impact of trauma on their lives can create opportunities to understand better the ways in which trauma is approached. The mapping of the timeline creates a mechanism for families to explore some previous traumas they have experienced, which may also be impacting on their ability to cope with their current loss.

Helping families to co-construct a new reality, as to how they live with unresolved loss, can assist them in becoming 'unstuck'.

## **A Protected Place**

Families of missing persons speak of the community's misconception about the impact, the "lived" experience, of unresolved loss. Families can find it challenging to speak honestly about the ambiguity they face, for fear that they may be misunderstood or their concerns minimised.

Families need to find a protected place where they can acknowledge the myriad of emotions that "missing" evokes.

In this section I have reflected upon family's ideas about building psychological fences around the Missing Person, their trauma and their challenge in living with unresolved loss. By acknowledging the benefit in building these fences the counsellor also needs to acknowledge the need to find a 'gate' to leave these protected places.

Families can choose to re-enter these protected places when needed. Due to the random nature of unresolved loss families are often forced to re-enter when a thought or a reminder about the missing person triggers their emotions. “I don’t go there often: you stay outside the wall. You might think about it but you don’t think about all the nasty stuff because I’ve managed to almost compartmentalise it in a way”.<sup>5</sup>

Some families of long term missing persons speak about visiting the ‘awfulness’ of ambiguity when they are within these protected places. Counselling can act as an invitation for people to move out of these places as well as an opportunity to re-enter when they want to reflect upon the missing person.

Giving a family permission to move in and out of their anguish gives some power back to families when they feel disempowered by the ambiguity of unresolved loss.

## **Opportunities for growth**

The experience of unresolved loss and the ways in which support can be provided are often confused with some of the outdated notions that grief is a process and that families need to move to a place of acceptance.

Timing is long term; from a counselling perspective the ability of a person to live with unresolved loss does not entirely focus on the status of the missing person’s investigation. The opportunities for growth reflect that in living with ambiguous loss there is a chance for change and movement.

Exploring the impact of unresolved loss is a long-term process; linking change and loss is a powerful method of intervention for families of missing persons. Helping families to explore the movement they have experienced since the disappearance may help to predict ways in which they can survive unresolved loss.

In focussing on opportunities for growth and incorporating the four other themes within the framework the counsellor’s role is to explore ways in which families can develop a tolerance for ambiguity – this is the goal of intervention.

## **How professionals acknowledge the impact of unresolved loss**

Much of this document has focussed upon the challenge of acknowledging the specific needs of families experiencing unresolved loss. Professionals who have contact with families of Missing Persons may need to explore their own degrees of tolerance for ambiguity prior to engaging in a therapeutic relationship with families.

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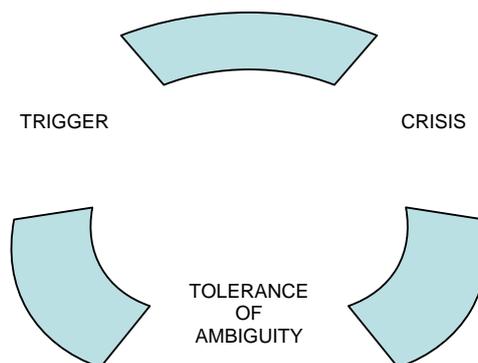
<sup>5</sup> Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (2005)

The roles and responsibilities of counselling those affected by unresolved loss have clear boundaries. There is a short, unpredictable and often-constant cycle experienced by families of Missing Persons particularly those who have long-term losses. The cycle of crisis, to tolerance of ambiguity, to a trigger about the Missing Person leading back to crisis appears to happen over and over when a person's location remains unknown (see Fig 1). Counsellors may find that sessions can appear to focus on the same issues week after week. However, taking time to step back and assess the family's ability to build resilience when circumstances remain the same is the most successful tool in gauging a family's ability to move forward.

Witnessing the break down of these barriers, that may have prevented families from building resilience and tolerating ambiguity, allows the counsellor to witness some opportunities for growth for families. Focussing sessions on the needs of the family members and away from the experience of 'missing' places the focus back on to the client. Many families of missing persons speak about becoming lost in the investigation process – professionals focussing entirely on the details of why or where a missing person has disappeared to rather than focussing on the impact of the unresolved loss on the family sitting across from you.

Professionals may need to explore their own unresolved or ambiguous losses they have experienced in their lives in order to be comfortable with 'not knowing'. 'To work with families of missing persons, we must first understand our own fear of that phenomenon and of having no answers'<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1



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<sup>6</sup> Boss P et al (2003)

## Where to from here?

From the research conducted, with the assistance of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, it was recognised that there was a need to develop a framework to ensure that Australian Families of Missing Persons received support that was reflective of the traumatic losses they had endured.

The way forward for service providers will be assisted by further developing the ideas introduced within the 'Five Themes for working with Families of Missing Persons'. It is anticipated that Service Providers will use this framework as a guide for working within this new sphere of intervention.

The 'Five themes for working with Families of Missing Persons' in its entirety will be tested in three phases over a 12-month period beginning in February 2007. The framework, in conjunction with the direct service delivery recommendations of this report, will form a working document that is relevant to the needs of Families of Missing Persons in Australia.

The framework will be developed in three collaborative phases:

1. Collaboration with Australian Families of Missing Persons to refine the framework and to explore its relevance to their experience of unresolved loss, by May 2007.
2. Collaboration with Health Care Professionals within and on the periphery of the Missing Persons sector, by August 2007.
3. Development of the framework with a dissemination strategy in collaboration with the Attorney General's Department of NSW and National Missing Persons Coordination Centre, Australian Federal Police by December 2007.

It is further anticipated that following the development of the framework that endorsement of the document will be sought by leading associations who can assist in disseminating the ideas outlined.

## Section Two

### **International Support Services for Families of Missing Persons and their relevance to the emerging support needs of families in Australia.**

Leonie Jacques' 2000 Churchill Fellowship investigated the international social policy response and provision of services for the families and friends of those who are missing<sup>7</sup>. The purpose of visiting some of these organisations for a second time was to compare the current model of service delivery in Australia, taking into account the dearth of trained professionals, as well as investigating ways to maximize the quality of support available.

It was interesting to note that whilst there are a number of International services providing 'support' the Family and Friends of Missing Persons Unit within the Attorney General's Department of NSW is pioneering much of the therapeutic interventions for those left behind when a loved one vanishes.

My research exposed me to service provision strategies that can be implemented in Australia. Electronic based support models and the involvement of proactive families, willing to support others, were some of the more appealing methods of intervention that could be further explored within the Australian approach to Missing Persons support. Particularly given the shortage of skilled professionals in the field.

The following agencies are attempting to bridge the gap between the need to assist in searching for missing persons and honouring the impact of unresolved loss for those who are left behind. As with the concepts explored during my time with Professor Pauline Boss many of the services struggled with their own professional ambiguity in recognising that despite their dedication sometimes there were no answers for the questions that families so often asked.

Each visit explored the vision of the service, its current method of service delivery and the implications for the Australian Missing Persons Sector.

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques I (2000)

## **Jacob Wetterling Foundation (JWF)**

[www.jwf.org](http://www.jwf.org)

**St Paul, Minnesota**

**USA**

The Jacob Wetterling Foundation (JWF) mission is to protect children from sexual exploitation and abduction through a combined program of prevention education and victims' assistance.

The foundation was established by Patty and Jerry Wetterling following the abduction of their son, Jacob in 1989 at the age of 11 near his home in St Joseph Minnesota. Jacob remains a missing person, Jacob will be 28 years old this year.

### **Service Delivery**

JWF utilises the Child Advocacy Centre Model (<http://www.nationalcac.org>) when supporting families and is one of only two other agencies in the US to use family gatherings as a support mechanism for families left behind (the other being The Morgan Nick Foundation [www.morgannick.com](http://www.morgannick.com)) JWF hold annual private gatherings for families – they are not run by practitioners or Law Enforcement but as a mechanism for families to “check in” on a yearly basis in terms of how they are coping and an opportunity to vent about the complexities of living with unresolved loss.

JWF staff provides training and education about child abduction and sexual exploitation with particular reference to online safety, predator lures and characteristics, indicators of victimisation or perpetration of violence, and sex offender community notification.

### **Implications for Australian Missing Persons Sector**

Many proactive families speak of recognising that they can no longer change the circumstances for their own families but by speaking, supporting and raising awareness they feel they are creating change for others who have, or will have, a loved one go missing.

Creating change as a result of crisis may give meaning to loss – assisting families to come together as a method of venting has not been as successful within the NSW Missing Persons sector as it appears to have been in the USA. Family gatherings, as also deconstructed during discussions with Pauline Boss, do not align themselves with particular religious or cultural denominations however they do create opportunities to remember those who are missing and to normalise the process through honest and realistic discussion. A recent participant of a family gathering said “Dwelling on the past without taking action to move forward in positive ways can cause greater pain and can immobilize you further...circle time is painful but helpful”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.jwf.org/ReadArticle.asp?articleId=50>

**National Center for Missing Adults  
Phoenix Arizona  
USA**

[www.theyaremissed.org](http://www.theyaremissed.org)

The National Center for Missing Adults (NCMA) operates as the National Clearinghouse for Missing Adults, providing services and coordination between various Government Agencies, Law Enforcement, media, and most importantly - the Families of Missing Adults across the United States. NCMA also maintains a national database of missing adults determined to be "endangered" or otherwise at-risk

The NCMA has a number of functions both in relation to their role in searching for missing persons and in support of those left behind. The Centre's vision statement includes:

1. To establish and maintain a national clearinghouse for missing adults
2. To assist law enforcement and families in locating missing adults
3. To serve as a national repository of information accessible to the general public, advocacy groups, and law enforcement for the purpose of tracking missing adults who are determined by law enforcement to be endangered due to age, diminished mental capacity, or the circumstances of disappearance are suspicious, when foul play is suspected or circumstances are unknown;
4. To maintain statistical information of adults reported as missing
5. To provide informational resources and referrals to families of missing adults
6. To assist in public notification and provide victim advocacy related to missing adults
7. To develop and deliver training to improve law enforcement response to missing adults and their families through training and promotion of best practices in service delivery.

NCMA classify family members of missing persons as secondary victims. The classification acknowledges the impact of unresolved loss on the psyche of an individual – both for short and long term Missing Persons cases.

NCMA manage an online support group for families of missing person and when budget constraints allow they also hold bi-monthly support groups for families to meet and engage with each other in a safe environment.

## **Service Delivery**

There were dual purposes for the visit to NCMA – one to discuss the establishment of an online and face-to-face support group for families of missing persons and also to learn about the NCMA role in supporting those left behind during Hurricane Katrina.

### **1. Support Groups**

The NCMA experience paralleled the Australian experience in the establishment and level of participation with face-to-face support groups – the Center reported initial energy from families however received minimal attendance (largest attendance was 18 participants), usually by many of the same families over significant periods of time. NCMA suggested that families were constantly faced with the reality and trauma of unresolved loss that they may not have wanted to revisit the issue with other families who mirrored their experience. The ideas explored in Section One of this report speak of the concept of ‘moving forward, not moving on’ perhaps this may account for family’s ambivalence about continuing to speak about their trauma when they are already faced with living ‘it’ on a daily basis.

The Center’s online support group [www.hope2support.com](http://www.hope2support.com) has almost 300 participants, which is significantly larger than attendance at face-to-face support groups.

The Center posts online conversational ‘threads’ on a regular basis as a means of generating discussion about trends within the Missing Persons sector. The online forum also provides opportunities for families to list significant dates (such as anniversaries and birthdays) on a centralised calendar, give advice about Law Enforcement matters (which may or may not be endorsed by NCMA) and generally discuss the frustrations and achievements relevant to their search. The NCMA Director of Case Management moderates the online service and subscribers to the forum are assessed and approved by the organisation to ensure that privacy and respect is provided to those who want support.

In meeting with one of the prominent supporters of the National Center for Missing Adults – Katrina Josytewa (aunt of long term missing adult Ira Josytewa) I found that as with families of Missing Persons in Australia Katrina felt that once she had reported her Nephew missing to Law Enforcement she did not know where else to turn. The Centre assisted her with media enquiries, arranged posters and helped to arrange a balloon release to commemorate the yearly anniversary of Ira’s disappearance. Katrina spoke of her loss being normalised by her contact with other families of Missing Persons– a theme often replicated by families in Australia when they get the opportunity to meet with other families of missing.

## 2. Missing due to Natural Disaster – Hurricane Katrina and the New Orleans Floods

In 2004 Hurricane Katrina swept across the North-Central Gulf Coast of the United States and became one of the costliest and deadliest storms in American History. Within 48 hours of the storm devastating the area NCMA were requested by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to assist in supporting the estimated 13000 displaced or missing people affected by the storm. The lessons learned from the Center's involvement with Hurricane Katrina, and the continuing aftermath of the impact of so many displaced persons, reflected some of the issues faced by the Australian Community during natural disasters such as the 2004 Asian Tsunami crisis. The Center coordinated a call centre to log requests for assistance from missing persons and those searching for them. The key lessons learned included:

- Displaced persons need to register their locations quickly to ensure that agencies can track where individuals are moved.
- Staff at call centres need to be trained in asking appropriate questions so that extraneous information is not collected.
- Message boards need to be established quickly and moderated by a small number of agencies to ensure that information is up to date and accessible. It also gives an opportunity for “evacuees and callers to enter information themselves”<sup>9</sup>.
- Try and minimise multiple case numbers being allocated to one case if many calls were made about an individual. A database should be available for disaster scenarios so that from the outset information can be collected in a succinct manner minimising the use of paper based files.
- NCMA acknowledged that the “national leading provider of missing person information during a catastrophe” they should continue to participate in future disasters to ensure that lessons learned can be utilised next time. Forming ongoing links with other disaster organisations acknowledges that future disasters will happen and implementing changes will ensure a better response for those affected.

The lessons learned may have primarily been from an administrative perspective however they acknowledged that the aim for families of missing persons is to locate loved ones. If agencies are able to respond with up to date and accurate information the anxiety and distress caused for families while they wait can be minimised. NCMA assisted in matching 10000 of an estimated 13000 displaced people to those who were searching for them. Establishing message boards

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<sup>9</sup> Konopka, D (2006)

early on in the disaster and having an available template to collect suitable information may alleviate the impact of unresolved loss from inevitable disasters in the future.

### **Implications for the Australian Missing Persons Sector**

Being the only identified counsellor for families of Missing Persons in Australia has created many opportunities to explore ways in which the NSW support model can be replicated in other states. An online support group offers support in a safe, moderated environment, free from media involvement, at minimal cost and potentially available 24 hours a day.

The Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit within the NSW Attorney General's Department has strived to resolve the geographical difficulties in supporting families of Missing Persons, particularly those who have long term cases. Annual church services have minimal attendance given that they are held in larger urban and regional communities. National Services are held in Canberra with primarily ACT residents only being able to attend.

Convening an online support group would allow Australian Missing Persons Services to provide referrals for appropriate support. The referral would be at almost no cost to the agency and it could link families from across the country who also struggle with the concepts of unresolved loss. NCMA has pioneered the online support group model for families of Missing Persons however in incorporating the use of a qualified counsellor as the convenor families the group would be assured of receiving support from both a "lived" experience in parallel with a therapeutic intervention.

Exploring further some of the ideas from the NCMA I located Project Jason ([www.projectjason.org](http://www.projectjason.org)). Project Jason was established by Kelly Jolkowski following the 2001 disappearance of her son, Jason. "Project Jason Family Member Chats" provide an opportunity similar to the online forum at NCMA to discuss specific issues associated with being a family member of a missing person. The non-profit organisation also invites special guests to every second "chat" focussing on different topics such as loss, legal issues, law enforcement etc linking families and professionals together to provide support.

The information gathered from NCMA about the disaster response to Missing Persons was particularly relevant as the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit had contact with those experiencing unresolved loss as a result of the Asian Tsunami in 2004. During the crisis response of the first 2-3 weeks following the event families spoke of their frustration in gaining up to date accurate information, not knowing how long they would have to wait and not feeling supported when the waiting became long term. One of the more significant aims of crisis intervention is providing families with the necessary information to

minimise their anxiety and anguish. The lessons learned from the agencies involved with Hurricane Katrina may assist the disaster response in Australia so that family members feel that their concerns are recorded systematically to ensure quick resolution.

**National Center for Missing and Exploited Children  
(www.ncmec.org)  
Alexandria Virginia  
USA**

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's® (NCMEC) mission is to help prevent child abduction and sexual exploitation; help find missing children; and assist victims of child abduction and sexual exploitation, their families, and the professionals who serve them.

NCMEC is a not for profit organisation that was co-founded by John and Reve Walsh following the abduction and subsequent murder of their six year old son, Adam Walsh, in 1981. The Center was officially opened in 1984, providing a 24-hour hotline and acting as a national clearinghouse of information about missing and exploited children.

In the US alone almost 800000 children are reported missing each year. NCMEC has a 94% recovery rate for missing children.

**Service delivery**

The Center provides assistance with all aspects of missing and exploited children issues such as Internet safety (NCMEC cyber tip line has accepted over 200000 reports since it was established in 1998), International Child Abduction, technical assistance to law enforcement and support for those left behind.

During my time at the centre I visited the International Case Division, Exploited Child Unit, Team HOPE and attended a 2-day seminar on Law Enforcement and Victim Impact.

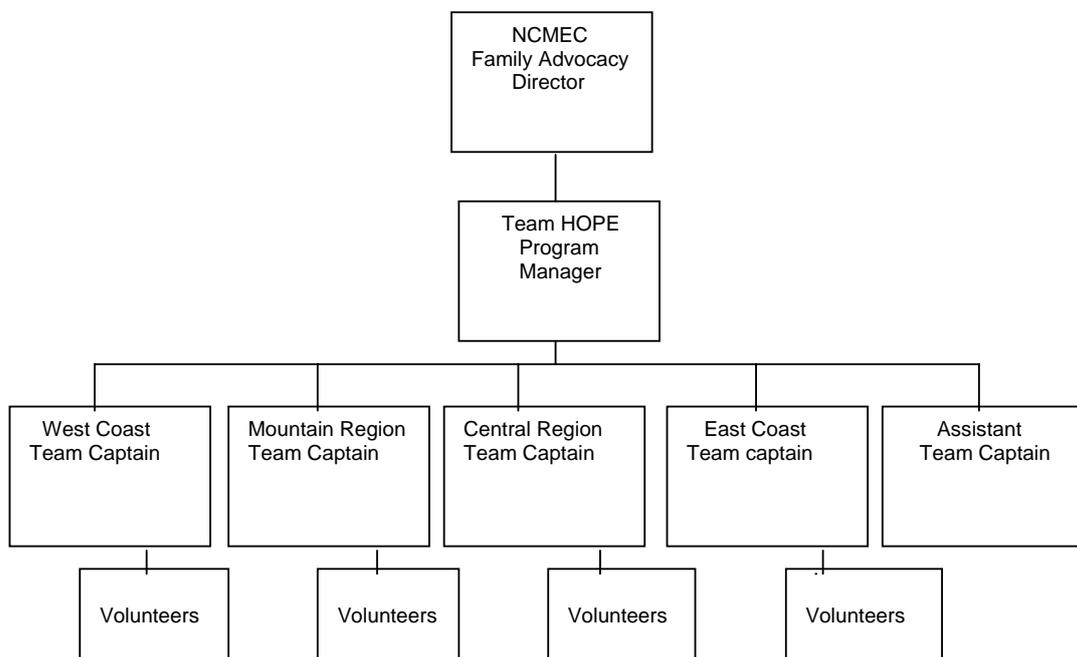
I was provided with a wealth of information – however for the purpose of this report I have focussed upon the role of Team HOPE and its impact on supporting those left behind.

**Team HOPE**

Team HOPE is a program of volunteers and staff who have, or have had, a child missing. At present there are over 150 volunteers trained by Team HOPE to

provide ongoing support to families new to the Missing Persons sector. Team HOPE is a section of the Family Advocacy division of NCMEC and has been funded by the US Department of Justice through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Team HOPE is realistic about its mission. It does not provide 24-hour assistance but responds to the needs of families within a reasonable timeframe. Contact is decided case-by-case depending on the needs of those experiencing a child being missing. There are over 5000 new referrals each year predominantly through the NCMEC hotline, with the majority being parents of runaway children. The make up of the team consists of:



Volunteers are matched by the following criteria:

- The case type (family abduction, non family abduction, runaway, internet enticement, “at risk” missing)
- If drugs, alcohol or domestic violence is involved
- Cultural and linguistic sensitivity
- Spiritual preference
- Personality type
- Geographic location and time zone.

Volunteers are given the right to refuse the referral and all costs associated with contact are met by NCMEC (volunteers are provided with pre-paid telephone systems). Volunteers are screened via a 2.5-day training course to ensure that involvement in the program does not re-traumatize or adversely affect the volunteers already dealing with their own unresolved losses. Volunteers are encouraged to tell their own stories to assist the program directors in assessing what “stage of healing” they are experiencing and in what ways they could support other families of Missing Children.

Volunteers have access to the Team HOPE database via a password-protected system. They have access only to their own referrals and are asked to record each contact they have with families to ensure that the program is supervised given the support needs of the families.

Team HOPE provides regular debriefing to volunteers by mental health professionals as well as crisis support when required. Team HOPE also provides monthly notices to acknowledge difficult dates and yearly retreats to assist in secondary trauma issues and to re-energize participants.

### **Implications for the Australian Missing Persons Sector**

As with the role of the National Centre for Missing Adults the primary focus of NCMEC to resolve missing children’s cases quickly and with minimal impact to the missing person and the family members involved.

I met with Abby Potash, the Program Manager for Team HOPE, who herself has experienced the trauma of having her only son, Sam, go missing for 8 ½ months at the age of 10. Thankfully through the efforts of NCMEC, the FBI and ADVO cards (<http://www.advo.com/corpcitizenship.html>) he was located and returned to her.

Team HOPE goes one step further than online/face to face support groups. It acknowledges the need to have professional intervention mixed with the invaluable benefits of the support of other families of Missing Persons. By ensuring that volunteers are well supported, through professional debriefing, families can benefit from hearing the “lived experience” of those who have had children missing, families need not be concerned that they are additionally burdening a person through the sharing of their story.

Whilst there are funding requirements for services such as Team HOPE the service provides a mix of professional expertise whilst harnessing the skills of families of missing who may be able to share what the meaning of their loss has meant for them in their life.

Duane Bowers, Grief Therapist and educator, has assisted in providing such support for volunteers of Team HOPE for the last 4 years. He is currently writing a book about his experiences in helping families of missing persons.

The experience procured through the funding of a counselor within the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit NSW Attorney Generals Department has shown that there are many families of long term missing persons keen to ensure that other families are well supported through their own journeys. Perhaps by mixing the two skill sets together a new blend of support can be provided.

### **Association des familles de personnes assassinees ou disparues (Murdered or missing persons families association)**

[www.afpad.ca](http://www.afpad.ca)

**Sherbrooke, Quebec**

#### ***Finding Strength in each other!***

Association des Familles de Personnes ou Disparues (AFPAD) defends the rights of families of victims through the provision of support and advice. AFPAD was established in 2004 by four fathers including Pierre-Hugues Boisvenu following the disappearance of his daughter Julia Boisvenu in 2002. The Boisvenu family found that there was a lack of professional referral for support and wanted to raise the profile that missing people are not the only victims in a disappearance. AFPAD is the first association in Quebec by victims for victims.

AFPAD is a not for profit organisation staffed by volunteers who come together as secondary victims of crime.

AFPAD's goals are:

1. To be available to families experiencing trauma – both as for missing or homicide cases.
2. Provide information relevant to families
3. Act as a vocal lobby group
4. Advocate on behalf of families of unsolved homicide or “cold cases”
5. Investigate preventative strategies for perpetrators of crime.

AFPAD currently supports over 300 families, an increase from only 15 referrals in 2004. AFPAD raise awareness about the experiences of families of missing persons through a strategic media focus and via legislative change for victims of crime. The founding members have created opportunities to ensure that families affected by missing or homicide automatically associate support needs with AFPAD. AFPAD aims to create a system that is “fair for all”.

## **Service delivery**

AFPAD provides individual and group support to families of missing persons. They receive referrals either directly from families as well as via law enforcement and the Crime Victims Assistance Office ([www.cavac.qc.ca](http://www.cavac.qc.ca))

AFPAD arrange bi-monthly family gatherings to ensure that families do not become isolated and to learn from the “drama experienced by others”. Guest speakers attend at the request of families to cover support and practical needs; Pierre-Hugues Boisvenu spoke of families needing to talk in order to reclaim their lives.

AFPAD have 60 professional volunteers from a number of disciplines who assist in the provision of support to family members - these include Psychologists, Social Workers, Doctors, Nurses, Lawyers and Criminologists.

As with other International organisations that were established from the experience of trauma the founders of AFPAD take care of themselves by taking care of others. Some have given themselves specific timeframes in terms of how long they commit to the service as well as utilising the skills developed in their own careers.

## **Implications for the Australian Missing Persons Sector**

Committees and support groups established by Australian Family members of Missing Persons need to acknowledge the realities of supporting others whilst living with the challenges of their own traumatic experiences. AFPAD has been strategic in developing some achievable goals as well as utilising its media profile to reach families, who may have otherwise not known about the service.

Families of Missing Persons in the Australian community, particularly in NSW, have acknowledged that they speculate as to how long they can commit to being proactively involved in the Missing Persons Sector and whether or not it is to the detriment or benefit of their mental health. AFPAD have a firm commitment to secondary victims of crime and disappearance as well as being mindful about the ramifications of proactivity.

AFPAD's membership of family members use these concerns as a reminder to support each other. The incorporation of time frames (in terms of how long a person wants to be involved in the sector) and identifying what the participant's primary aims of involvement will be may assist in not over-burdening those who wish to support others in similar circumstances. These lessons could be utilised in Australia.

**Le Reseau Enfants Retour**  
**The Missing Children's Network Canada**  
[www.enfantsretour.ca](http://www.enfantsretour.ca)  
**Westmount, Quebec**

### **Missing but never forgotten...**

Enfants Retour, The Missing Children's Network Canada is a humanitarian organisation whose mission is to assist parents in their search for missing children as well as raising community awareness.

### **Service delivery**

Enfants Retour employs a multi-skilled approach to supporting and assisting families of missing children. In addition to assisting Law Enforcement in locating missing children the service has also developed the following approaches:

- Prevention campaigns to raise the profile regarding risk factors for missing children.
- Fundraising to assist with search and location.
- A yearly Radiothon to solicit private donations
- A "breakfast of Hope" on International Missing Children's Day

Enfants Retour acknowledge the impact of unresolved loss by supporting families to search and locate their missing children, by actively introducing families to each other, utilising family testimonials to publicise the "real story" of ambiguous loss and emphasising community awareness to de-mystify myths about missing children.

Enfants Retour define emotional support similarly to AFPAD - by actively listening to their clients, identifying how they can assist families and providing professional referrals to Community Health Centres when families require more specialised support.

### **Implication for the Australian Missing Persons Sector**

Enfants Retour recognise that to bridge the gap between a missing persons report and enhancing a family's ability to live with unresolved loss services need to provide long term and consistent care in both the practical and emotional aspects of service delivery.

Creating community awareness allows families to demonstrate the impact of unresolved loss as well as generating funding for the service to continue working with and on behalf of families of missing persons.

For Missing Persons support services to be relevant they need to be available for the long term – to acknowledge that Missing Persons is not a short-term phenomena but for some it is long term.

**National Missing Persons Helpline**  
**[www.missingpersons.org](http://www.missingpersons.org)**  
**East Sheen, London**

The National Missing Persons Helpline is the only UK charity dedicated to finding missing persons and supporting those left behind. Mary Ausprey and Janet Newman established the service in 1993 in response to the disappearance of Susie Lamplugh – a young real estate agent in South West London. The service has grown considerably in size over the last decade and focuses on locating missing persons as well as supporting families affected by unresolved loss.

The Home Office estimates that over 210,000 Missing Persons reports are accepted by Police every year in the United Kingdom.

**Service delivery**

The National Missing Persons Helpline has a number of services aimed at reducing the incidence and impact of missing. During my visit I spent some time with the services observing their role and exploring the ways in which they seem to minimise the impact of unresolved loss.

**National Missing Persons Helpline**

The National Missing Persons Helpline is the core support mechanism for the agency. The helpline provides support and guidance for those who have a family member or friend missing. Support is in the form of search advice, publicity about the case and post missing support.

The helpline also assists the Police and Social Services in addressing Missing Persons issues and assistance with investigations.

The helpline has an active communications division that has established a solid working relationship with the UK media. The helpline publicises missing person's

cases through The Big Issue (magazine), weekly appeals in the Daily Mirror and various television and radio programs.

The Helpline receives in excess of 35000 calls each year. The Helpline has a location rate of almost 70%.

### **Message Home Helpline**

Message Home Helpline was established for adults who wish to reconnect with their families. Individuals can leave messages for families, friends or carers to let them know they are safe.

The service receives approximately 68000 enquiries per year.

### **Runaway Helpline**

The Runaway Helpline is promoted in every phone box in the UK to encourage young people who have, or plan to, leave their family homes to access support and advice. The Helpline is a crisis counselling service whose primary aim is to link young people with their families or the appropriate support agencies that may assist them. By educating and supporting young people the Helpline may limit the vulnerability young people may experience while being away from home.

The Helpline also provides online support with a commitment to return emails within a 24-hour timeframe.

The Runaway Helpline received over 54000 calls in 2005. 85% of calls were from young people under the age of 15 years and almost 60% of those who identified themselves as runaways were not reported as missing to the Police.

The National Missing Persons Helpline also assists law enforcement with an identification and reconstruction specialist. Many long-term cases are provided with age enhancement photographs to promote media exposure to assist in resolving cases. The specialist also assists with profiling unidentified remains and providing illustrations for the services database.

### **Implications for Australian Missing Persons Sector**

When a missing persons report is made to Australian Police families have limited options in terms of turning to other agencies to assist them with search options. Many of the non- profit search agencies I visited internationally provide support to law enforcement as well as support for those who search. During my visit I enquired about the ways in which the NMPH felt it was different to the role of

Police during investigations. A case worker spoke of being perhaps more effective in liaising with families, having improved access to publicity (in comparison to the Police), creating continuity of service for families and being able to conduct generalised searches through the access of public records.

The Helpline prioritises cases depending on whether or not the missing person is “at risk” compared with “lost contact” (family members who had become disconnected from each other).

Whilst Australian families can access the Salvation Army Family Tracing Agency ([www.salvationarmy.org.au/familytracing](http://www.salvationarmy.org.au/familytracing)) they must wait more than 6 months from the date of the disappearance before further investigations can be made (to ensure that searches do not conflict with Police investigations). Six months is an extremely long and traumatic time to ask families to wait for additional advice about how to locate a missing person.

Families often talk of support not only being about emotional issues but assistance with searching so that they feel they are doing everything possible to locate a loved one.

Some of the lessons learnt in Australia regarding the emotional support of families may need to be further extended to support regarding other avenues of searching, perhaps similar to the UK National Missing Persons Helpline.

## **Missing in Ireland Support Services**

**[www.miss.ie](http://www.miss.ie)**

### **Ireland**

Dermot Browne established MISS in 2003 following the 13-week disappearance of his son, Derek Browne. MISS is a non-denominational, non-political, non-profit, voluntary organisation that provides help and support to families of missing persons. Dermot’s personal experience has shaped the mission of the service which aims to ensure that families have a safety net to fall upon after they report a loved one missing.

### **Current method of service delivery**

In March 2005 the Ireland National Missing Persons Helpline’s funding was withdrawn thus removing MISS’ primary referral point. Since then a minimal amount of one-off funding has been offered which MISS believes is insufficient for the services aims. Over 5500 people continue to be reported missing in Ireland in each year (of a population of 4.5 million people).

MISS runs entirely on volunteer dedication. Staff provide “helpline” support each evening and attempt to provide opportunities for community awareness to further profile the plight of families of missing person. Some of the primary achievements of the service include:

- Establishment of a training program for volunteers to begin in 2007. The 60 hour course will provide participants with a “Certificate in Missing Persons Support” with the option of a further 40 hour training course to provide participants with a diploma.
- Co-ordination of the “Missing Miles Cycle”. A cycling event to raise the profile of long term missing persons cases in regional areas of the republic.
- A message Board for family members to generate discussion about the impact of unresolved loss on their lives.
- Continuing focus on educating the Gardai about the importance of investigating missing persons cases and acknowledging the impact on those left behind.

MISS continue to generate energy with no funding, no government support and a commitment to have Adult missing persons cases included on the Law Enforcement agenda.

### **Implications for the Australian Missing Persons Sector**

A significant proportion of Australian families of long term missing persons (more than one year) attempt to become proactive about the emotional and practical aspects of unresolved loss.

At present volunteers are not utilised in the provision of support to those affected by missing persons. MISS are taking the opportunity to ensure that despite no funding their volunteers can provide evidence based, specialised support to people who request assistance.

Services such as MISS may create opportunities for Australian families of missing persons to observe the ways in which they could create change within the Missing Persons Sector. The training of volunteers also reinforces that to support people experiencing unresolved loss professionalism and knowledge of the impact is necessary and respectful.

## Conclusion

30000 people are reported missing to Law Enforcement agencies in Australia every year. This may be a conservative number – missing is not a risk factor we generally associate happening to us in our lifetime. We worry about disease, divorce or natural disaster. In the three years working in the Missing Persons sector not one family told me that they had thought “missing” would happen to them.

My Fellowship showed me that Australia, and in particular New South Wales, is at the forefront of acknowledging and honouring the impact of unresolved loss on those left behind. Unresolved or ambiguous loss is a destructive, traumatic and chronic health issue. It challenges the community; it makes us acknowledge that random acts **do** happen and that sometimes we don't always know the answers. I sought to clarify how professionals can support families to develop a tolerance for ambiguity.

My fellowship has raised issues that have specific and generalised implications for the Australian Missing Persons Sector. Some can be implemented from an Agency/Government perspective and other ideas may generate some energy amongst Families of Missing Persons who want to learn of new ways in which they can translate the trauma they have experienced into supporting others.

The key recommendations of this report will be presented to:

### **State:**

Presentation of recommendations to

- Victims Services, NSW Attorney Generals Department
- NSW Missing Persons Committee Inc
- NSW Police Missing Persons Unit
- Salvation Army Family Tracing Agency

### **National:**

- NALAG National Conference on Loss, October 2007
- Roundtable on Missing Persons in Australia, Australian Institute of Criminology, December 2006
- National Missing Persons Co-ordination Centre, Australian Federal Police

## Recommendations

NSW is the only state in Australia that provides a free, specialised counselling service that acknowledges unresolved loss in relation to missing persons. Whilst almost one third of missing person's reports occur in New South Wales it is not the only state with families experiencing the social and mental health ramifications of being "left behind".

In my experience of the Australian Missing Persons Sector, and with the wealth of information gained by visiting those within the global Missing Persons community, I believe that a number of new initiatives need to be enacted. I have received a commitment from both the NSW Attorney General's Department and the Australian Federal Police Missing Persons Sector to publicise the lessons learned from my fellowship in order to initiate some discussion on how we can better meet the needs of this marginalised group.

It is proposed that the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit, Attorney General's Department of NSW in consultation with family members of Missing Persons, State and Federal agencies and international colleagues consider the following recommendations:

1. Establishment of specialised support services in all States and Territories outside NSW to provide evidence based support for families and friends of Missing Persons. Services need to be committed to the long-term support needs of those experiencing unresolved loss.

It is anticipated that these specialised services will be able to utilise the 'Five themes for working with Families of Missing Persons' following its completion in late 2007.

2. Pilot a New South Wales online support group (with a view to a National Support Group) for Families of Missing Persons moderated by a skilled professional who has understanding of unresolved loss and the impact of the telling of the "lived experience".

Investigate the establishment of family gatherings as a support mechanism for families of Missing Persons as a follow on to the relationships formed within the online support group.

3. Development of a publication aimed at educating and supporting families who chose to become proactive within the Missing Persons Sector – helping to identify the goals they wish to achieve by promoting change as well as self-care techniques to prevent re-traumatisation.

4. Inclusion of 'missing' as a risk factor amongst service providers who may come in contact with those at risk of going missing – Youth, Mental Health, Drug and Alcohol, Dementia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders support services.
  5. Inclusion of the concepts of unresolved loss within the grief module of undergraduate degrees or diplomas such as Welfare Studies, Social Work, Mental Health training, and Psychology to further expand the knowledge and skill set of counsellors in the Australian Community.
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