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FAMILY RELATIONSHIP CENTRES IN AUSTRALIA: SHOULD THEY BE GOVERNED BY A SINGLE BODY?

Abstract:

Marital problems, divorce, separation, child custody battles- all of these social issues hold a significant value in any society let it be Australia or any other part of the world. In the year 2011, there were 24,144 divorces involving children under 18 years of age which represented 48.4% of total divorces granted in Australia. These figures do not even include the children affected by parental separation from de-facto relationships, a phenomenon which is on the rise. This paper discusses the Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) introduced in Australia from 2006 onwards to help separating or separated parents transition from parenting as a couple to a single parent arrangement with a focus on the wellbeing of children caught amidst the separation process. I argue that while FRCs have shown early success largely owing to the centralization of the service, in order for FRCs to sustain in the long run they have to be ultimately run a single service provide as opposed to different ones in different states to achieve consistency in their services. This paper will be divided into five sections. The first will briefly summarise the missions and goals of FRCs. The second will look at some of the key political issues that brought about the inception of FRCs. The third will look at some early signs regarding the early success of FRCs. The fourth will examine FRCs operational structure focusing on different service providers and the last section will provide recommendation regarding the creation of a single governing body to overlook the whole FRC operations in Australia.

Keywords:

Family Relationship Centres, Divorce, Children, Australia

Family Relationship Centres

Marital problems, divorce, separation, child custody battles- all of these social issues hold a significant value in any society, let it be Australia or any other part of the world (DeVaus & Gray, 2003). In the year 2011, there were 24,144 divorces involving children under 18 years of age which represented 48.4% of total divorces granted in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014). These figures do not even include the children affected by parental separation from de-facto relationships, a phenomenon which is on the rise (Cashmore et al., 2010). From 2006 onwards, the family law system in Australia saw a major reform with the introduction of Family Relationship Centres (FRCs). Between the years 2006-2008, 65 FRCs were established all over Australia along with a national telephone service called Relationship Advice Line and a website providing information, advice, referral and mediation regarding parenting disputes. FRCs were meant to serve as an early intervention strategy, helping parents manage the transition from parenting as a couple to parenting alone after separation. They help separated or separating couples with access to different services and educational programs keeping the children in focus after separation. FRCs mission also includes strengthening family relationships and helping families stay together. Additionally, they intend to be the “gateway” to services which help people cope with issues such as domestic violence, alcohol or gambling addiction and anger management (Parkinson, 2013).

Background

The idea of FRCs was contemplated, nurtured and developed against the backdrop many previous community-based mediation services to assist separated parent dating back to mid-1980's (MoLoney, 2013). It was thus built upon a prevailing and well-grounded service capacity. In 2001, The Family Law Pathways Advisory Group presented a report which recognized the importance of different pathways towards parenting dispute resolution. It identified three pathways namely- self-help (people who need parenting education and legal information or advice), supported pathway (people who need counselling and mediation along with self-help) and litigation pathway. While the report met with positive reception, the government's response to it was somewhat indifferent (Attorney General's Department, 2003). The government still persisted with the development of an online service named Family Law Online as a nationwide source of information regarding family law system along with the prior commitment to family relationships education. One new initiative was the development of local networks of post-separation service providers with the goal of a more integrated service delivery in each region (Parkinson, 2013). The report however, laid the foundation for the upcoming FRCs in the future.

Another report came along to support the idea of FRCs was an evaluation of the Family Relationships Services Program. Conducted in the second half of 2003, the report identified lack of awareness of services as one of the biggest problems. When told about these services, most non-users answered affirmatively towards the use of these services (Colmar Brunton, 2004). Consequently, the visibility and the accessibility of these services were recognized as the major issue of concern. In the latter part of 2003, Prime Minister, John Howard announced a parliamentary inquiry on “joint custody”, meaning a shared parenting arrangement. The Prime Minister showed concern towards the boys growing in single parent families lacking male role models. These concerns were backed by national size surveys showing fathers disappearance from young boy’s lives after divorce or separation. Additionally, other studies demonstrated a great deal of unhappiness between both, children and their fathers regarding the lack of involvement in each other’s lives (Smyth, Sheehan, & Fehlberg, 2001). On the issue of joint custody, the parliamentary inquiry recommended in favor of equal parental responsibility emphasizing on greater levels of shared parenting time. The committee also recommended drastic changes to family law system (Family and Community Affairs Committee, 2003, ch.4). While the committee was in favor of a Family Tribunal system in Australia the government wanted to find another way forward which ultimately gave birth to the FRCs.

FRCs Early Success

Among many key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure the success of the organization, FRCs have one major long term objective- a gradual cultural change in the way people handle their parenting arrangements post separation. FRCs overall success in the long run depends upon the non-resident parents (fathers usually) continued involvement in their children’s lives post separation by potentially building a harmonious relationship with their ex partners (Dudley, 1991). While it is early days to measure FRCs long term success, some short term evaluations are somewhat encouraging. For example, an evaluation conducted by Australian Institute of Family Studies saw the overall applicants for final orders in children’s matters declining by 22% from 2005-06 to 2008-09 (Kaspiew et al, 2009, pp. 304–05). Also, since the introduction of FRCs the use of mediation and counselling services increased from 67% to 73%, while parents contact with courts regarding children disputes decreased from 40% to 29% (Kaspiew et al., 2009, p. 50). There has also been a significant decline in the number of court applications regarding family/children disputes over the last five year period since the introduction of FRCs. An analysis conducted by Auditor-General interviewing 25 FRC managers highlighted that a significant number of clients would have not accessed legal system due to financial constraints and that the FRC services were reaching those who did not prefer to go through legal proceedings (Australian National Audit Office, 2010, p. 68).

Analysis

The introduction of FRCs in Australia represent the existing marital problems in Australia and through this major governmental investment of nearly \$150 million (Pidgeon, 2013) the means to subsidize the damage caused especially to children of broken families. The most important benefit of FRCs is the centralization of a service which is related not only to divorce or separation but also to issues of domestic violence or family crisis. The mediation provided by FRCs to various consumers based on their problems is the major advantage of having FRCs. They are more than just “divorce shops” (Parkinson, 2013), any couple or family going through difficult times can contact FRCs and be mediated towards the right service or advice. While the idea of FRCs is highly consumer oriented with early signs of success, the related operational matters associated with FRCs are a concern. For example, the issue of finding staff with certain experience in different geographical locations especially in remote regions and more importantly keeping that staff, largely due to FRCs modest pay structure. Another operational challenge is the use of different service providers in different locations. While all the service providers are non-profit based and fully funded by the government using the same FRC common identity and logo, the problem remains the standard of the services provided which are likely to differentiate between different service providers. While, the government has implemented a training and accreditation process to standardize FRC services, its effectiveness remains subjected to future evaluations of the training program. Also, the selection of service providers is somewhat influenced by political thoughts and contemplations (Australian National Audit Office). Parkinson (2013) calls this only a matter of detail, but the operations of FRCs should be free from political considerations if they have to sustain in the long run with the original missions and goals. It would be an unwanted paradox to have a service so personal to be influenced by political decisions.

Recommendations

Instead of FRCs being run by various service providers, a single independent FRC governing body should be made responsible to carry out FRC services all over Australia. This is the best way to reach the desired level of standardization of FRC services. It will also help mitigate political considerations regarding the contract for running FRC services in various different regions. To achieve this, a parliamentary committee should be summoned to carry out a research regarding the possibility of an independent authority over FRCs. If the findings are positive then a plan should be mapped out to start building an independent organization dedicated towards the FRC operations. It can be tempting to choose an organization already in the family services field as it would save money and time. But finding an organization well equipped with this major responsibility is potentially a tedious task. Also, this process can attract political considerations and favors along the selection path. Additionally, a government change can result in potential shuffling or

change of the responsible organization which can prove to be time wasting, money consuming and a potentially reputation damaging exercise for FRCs.

On the other hand, with a FRC governing body, the intended levels of standardization can be met with training centres in each state ran by the body. The process of hiring employees in relation to qualification and experience can also be standardized with specific guidelines. Trained employees can be sent to different locations to train all the other FRC staff members on how to operate their centres in accordance to the standard regulations. It will also be much easier for the government to administer the overall progress of FRCs with one governing body. Also, even in an event of political change (elections) the organization can keep working independently as a FRC governing body. The FRC governing body can help make sure that all the rules and regulations are centralized and that they are followed by all the FRCs at all times.

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