

Evaluation in Brief – Families of Offenders Resource Kit (FORK)

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In late 2006, the Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO) received funding from FAHCSIA (then FACSIA) to undertake a 3 year project, the Families of Offenders Resource Kit (FORK). The project established working groups consisting of local services and families in eight different local areas, and developed a locally relevant resource kit outlining issues and strategies for supporting families of offenders.

The project had three main objectives:

1. Improve local service capacity to respond to 'at risk' children and families of prisoners;
2. Increase awareness and understanding about the impact of imprisonment on children and families;
3. Strengthen connections between VACRO and a broader range of community and support agencies.

Additionally, the FORK project sought to reconnect VACRO, which is a state wide agency providing direct service, back into the community. This strategy was intended to develop referral pathways and linkages at a local level in order to reach vulnerable families more effectively and to work consistently with one of the organisation's guiding principles, community justice.

Key Learnings

The FORK project demonstrated the importance of:

- 1. Relationship building with local services including specialised areas such as indigenous services**
- 2. A strong understanding of the local area**
- 3. Use of existing networks and working groups**
- 4. Involvement of people most impacted by the issues**
- 5. Identification of opportunities for new projects representing needs of communities**

The key learning from the FORK project related to the skills and resources necessary to undertake the type of community development necessitated by a project such as FORK. Relationship building and developing local knowledge in a short period of time proved to be central to the success of the project in each area. Drawing on existing and established networks has been extremely important to the project given the timelines (approximately four months in each local government area).

The project evaluation also pointed to the specific skills, knowledge and strategies appropriate to developing good relationships with indigenous community organisations. The knowledge and relationships formed within the context of FORK have facilitated opportunities for a stronger focus on working with indigenous communities within VACRO as a whole.

Understanding the demographics and culture of a particular area, as well as identifying the focus of key services such as local council were important steps in successful engagement with the various local communities. The FORK project covered inner urban, outer urban and regional areas. A certain level of flexibility determined successful collaboration within very different communities.

Importantly, participation by people affected by the issue – that is families where there is an offender/defendant, was pivotal. Families attended the working group and assisted with training enabling the issue to be communicated in a realistic and grounded context. The families that did participate found the process to extremely beneficial on a personal level.

Finally, the project facilitated the identification of new programs and projects in relation to supporting the families of offenders from a grassroots community perspective. The project responded to the needs articulated by both the families and the community services supporting them. The website in particular has reflected these needs as they arose, in addition to the development of new initiatives.

The evaluation and explicit project outcomes have provided a good foundation from which to consider next steps in the process of shifting VACRO's profile and support work into the community sector where VACRO anticipates establishing a more visible profile for the needs of families and children of offenders.