

Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit Counselling Service: What to expect



Families & Friends of Missing Persons
Attorney General & Justice

Information sheet

March 2010

TERMS USED IN THIS DOCUMENT

Please note that in this document the term 'family' is used to refer to anyone who has a significant relationship with the person who is missing.

The term 'counselling' is used to describe the ongoing support provided to families of missing people whether it is practical or emotional support, or both.

WHAT THE FFMPU COUNSELLING SERVICE PROVIDES

FFMPU provides both practical and emotional support to families left behind when a loved one goes missing. Practical support may include advocacy on behalf of families, referral to other agencies, assistance in negotiating with other agencies such as police or media, and provision of general information.

Some families also require emotional support around the experience of missing. Emotional support may include providing a safe place to talk about your experiences of missing, help in dealing with the trauma of someone being missing and the associated physical and emotional impact of this trauma, guidance in understanding how to deal with the feeling of "not knowing", and support through the experience of balancing an ongoing search with the demands of everyday life.

Some family members may request short-term crisis support to help them survive the immediate distress experienced when someone goes missing, other family members may access the service over longer periods of time. FFMPU works with family member's "where they are at" and in line with what they feel they need, whether it be practical or emotional support.

FFMPU responds to people with compassion and respect to effect positive change in their lives.

It is difficult to articulate what families might achieve or learn when they engage with the FFMPU counselling service because of the unique nature of everyone's experiences. The counselling service has been working with families since 2003 and in this time families have shared feedback about the service helping them to survive the trauma of someone missing.

FFMPU acknowledges that whilst it cannot solve a missing person's investigation, involvement in the lives of those left behind may provide families with a safe outlet in which they can explore the unresolved trauma of a missing person.

The framework that the FFMPU bases their support services on is specifically tailored to the needs of families of missing persons, entitled **Supporting those who are left behind**. You can access this framework either by asking FFMPU for a copy or accessing the document online at:

<http://www.missingpersons.gov.au/supporting>

LOCATION OF FFMPU COUNSELLING SERVICES

Please negotiate with the FFMPU counsellor the best way to make contact that suits your needs and the abilities of the agency.

Support can be offered either through face to face, by telephone, by email, or a combination of any of these. Face to face counselling sessions are offered at:

- ◆ the FFMPU office in Parramatta, NSW (Level 1, 160 Marsden Street Parramatta); or
- ◆ a neutral location that is suitable to your needs and the counsellor;

In some exceptional circumstances home visits may be offered.

FFMPU is funded to provide service to residents of NSW who have a loved one who is missing, or to those who reside outside of the NSW region but who have someone missing within NSW (or were last known to reside in NSW before they went missing). For residents outside of NSW or in regional areas of NSW, telephone or email counselling is the primary form of contact. If face to face counselling is required, FFMPU will work with you to identify an appropriate support service in your local area, and can provide clinical support to this service around "missing" issues.

TIMING OF CONTACT

Counselling services are offered **9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday**. The agency is a small one, with three identified positions – two counsellors and a coordinator. If you try and contact FFMPU by phone and the FFMPU is unavailable, your message will be responded to within two business days of the message being left.

FFMPU tailors the support service to the needs of each family. At times, families may feel they need more frequent contact, for example in the time immediately after someone has gone missing. At other times, families may find they need less frequent contact.

If ongoing support is requested, the counsellor will ask for your contact details. You are under no obligation to provide these contact details. If you are able to provide contact details, please advise the counsellor of:

- a) the best way to contact you, for example by mail or phone or the most appropriate times to call;
- b) if it is appropriate for the counsellor to leave a message if there is an answering service on any of your provided contact numbers;
- c) whether you would like to be added to the mailing list.
- d) some families request that FFMPU contact them at particular times, for example on birthdays and anniversaries of the missing person. This can be discussed individually with your counsellor.

FEES

FFMPU counselling services are free; the service is funded by the Department of Attorney General and Justice and is located within Victims Services.

CANCELLATION OF SERVICES

If you need to cancel a face to face session please give the counsellor as much notice as possible, your counsellor will similarly provide adequate notice if they have to cancel a session. If you would like to cease contact with FFMPU, please notify the service and we will close any existing file and be respectful of your privacy. You may, however, choose to recontact the service at a later time if needed.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Information shared with FFMPU counselling services, including scheduling of, or attendance at appointments, content of your sessions, progress in counselling, and your records, are confidential, except where:

1. there is a legal requirement to disclose, for example, a subpoena is issued (at which time we will inform you that a subpoena has been issued); or
2. information is learned that would place you or another person at serious and imminent risk; or
3. there is disclosure of ongoing harm to a child (mandatory reporting). You can get more information on mandatory reporting by asking the FFMPU counsellor or accessing the DoCS website: http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/preventing_child_abuse_and_neglect.html
4. your prior approval has been obtained to exchange information on your behalf (*see the section below on Exchange of Information*).

EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION

If you contact FFMPU for advocacy or support you may be asked to sign a **consent form** to allow the FFMPU to contact other agencies (such as the Police, State Coroners Office, or other professionals such as a GP or lawyer) on your behalf. A copy of the consent form is attached and can also be downloaded from the **Counselling and Support** page on the FFMPU website: <http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/missingpersons>

COLLECTION AND HOLDING OF CLIENT INFORMATION

As part of providing a counselling service to families of missing persons, we will need to collect and record personal information from you that is relevant to your current situation. The information is retained in order to document what happens during sessions, and enables the counsellor to provide a relevant and informed counselling service. All information is kept in accordance with privacy laws set out in the *NSW Health Records and Information Privacy Act (2002)*. Please note that you do not have to give all your personal information and you have the right to not answer questions asked of you.

Client files are held in a secure filing cabinet, which is accessible only to FFMPU. The information on each file includes personal information such as name, address, contact phone numbers, and other information, which is relevant to the counselling service being provided.

REQUESTS FOR ACCESS TO CLIENT INFORMATION

At any stage you, as a client, are entitled to access the information about you that is kept on file, unless the relevant legislation provides otherwise. The counsellor may discuss with you appropriate forms of access.

REFERRALS

Referrals are an important part of any counselling relationship. From time to time you and your counsellor may decide you need help from other professionals or agencies. In some counselling relationships you may find that the relationship is not a good fit for you. If you feel you need access to different support please feel free to discuss this with FFMPU staff. Referrals will be made in full consultation with yourself and with respect to your right to privacy.

SAFETY IN COUNSELLING SESSIONS

We do our best to cultivate a safe, relaxed and confidential environment when working with our clients. If at any time you or your counsellor does not feel safe you both have the right to interrupt or end the session as you see fit. If you have any concerns over safety please talk to your counsellor as a matter of urgency. In order to maintain safety for both you and the counsellor it is a requirement that if a client attends sessions under the influence of alcohol or drugs that the session be terminated, this session may be rescheduled at a later time.

COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE AND FEEDBACK

You may find yourself in a situation where you are unhappy with, or have concerns about, the counselling services provided. You have a right to have a voice about this. You may approach a concern or grievance about the service in a number of ways (that suits you best):

1. You should first try and contact the staff member you have been dealing with. Often this can clear up misunderstandings and sort out problems quickly.

2. You can ask to speak to the staff member's supervisor.
Phone (02) 8688 5414
Emailffmpu@agd.nsw.gov.au
3. Complaints can be made over the phone or in writing. If a complaint it is about a serious or complex matter or allegation it is best to put it in writing. Written complaints should be addressed to:
**The Director,
Victims Services
Locked Bag 5118
Parramatta NSW 2124**
4. If you need help to make a complaint, or if you just want to discuss your problem before deciding whether to make a complaint, you can call and ask for the **Client Support Manager** who can help you decide what you would like to do next. The number is **1800 633 063** or **(02) 8688 5511** or if you are in the Sydney Metropolitan Area.
5. You can request a copy of the Victims Services **complaints procedure policy** or it can be accessed at:
http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/victimsservices/ll_vs.nsf/pages/VS_aboutuscomplaints

Please note that if you have positive or negative feedback we would appreciate hearing from you so we can ensure our service is as relevant as possible to our clients.

INTERPRETER SERVICES

If you need an interpreter, contact the **Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS)** on **131 450**, state what language you speak and the operator will connect you to an interpreter who speaks your language.

When you are connected, ask the telephone interpreter to call the **Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit** within **Victims Services** on **1800 227 772 (Toll free)** for assistance. FFMPU can also arrange for interpreters to attend counselling sessions as required.

You can also access the **National Relay Service** on **1800 555 677** if you have hearing or speech difficulties.

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Alternative formats of this information are available.

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CONTACT DETAILS

For further information about this material or other topics, please call us on:

Phone: (02) 8688 8173 or 1800 227 772 • **National Relay Service:** 1800 555 677

Fax: (02) 8688 9631 • **Email:** ffmpu@agd.nsw.gov.au

www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/missingpersons