



New South Wales Government
Attorney General's Department
Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit

GROUP WORK: EXPLORING THE CONTINUED SUPPORT NEEDS OF FAMILIES OF MISSING PERSONS

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Published by Families & Friends of Missing Persons Unit,
Attorney General's Department of NSW

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ISBN 978-1-921590-09-2

June 2009

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Ambiguous loss

A loss defined by Professor Boss as both the physical absence and/or psychological absence of a person (such as the loss of a missing person).

Families / family

A person that has a close relationship with the missing person, not necessarily a person related biologically.

FFMPU

Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit, Attorney General's Department of NSW, Sydney, Australia.

Group work

Group work brings together people with a common challenge or life situations to provide support and information in a safe environment.

Missing persons sector

Agencies, individuals, health practitioners/professionals, police and non-police search agencies and families affected by the incidence of, and/or working in the field of missing persons.

For additional information about service providers please refer to the FFMPU web site:

<www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/missingpersons>

INTRODUCTION

The Families and Friends of the Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU), within NSW Attorney General's Department, currently offers support and counselling services for those left behind when a loved one goes missing. Counselling is provided both in person and over the telephone, in accordance with the National Counselling Framework¹ which identifies themes and approaches to addressing 'ambiguous loss.'²

Families and friends of missing people may "respond in similar ways to those exposed to a sudden trauma: shock, distress, confusion, ambivalence and a considerable sense of being overwhelmed."³ More unique to the experience of missing, however, is the "uncertainty and hopelessness people experience when a trauma occurs that is difficult to define as either temporary or permanent."⁴

This project explored the way in which group work could be of assistance, to people experiencing the ambiguous loss when someone is missing. The project was managed by Alisa Wicks, a third year social work student from the University of New South Wales.

As a primary method of social work practice, it is universally acknowledged that "groups can provide a powerful mechanism for change."⁵ Winston Churchill Memorial Fellowships exploring the international services available to families and friends of missing persons, and their relevance for Australian service delivery have revealed the effectiveness of group work in this field. Published recommendations regarding the development of group work services in Australia have supported this statement.

There are currently no specific groups in place for families and friends of missing persons on a state or national level. Consequently, clients seeking group interaction have to rely on more generalised services such as homicide, suicide or bereavement support. Although there may be commonality in the issues faced by group members, the differences may also compound trauma for someone experiencing an unresolved loss. For families who are isolated by the very nature of having someone missing, this isolation can be exacerbated by finding themselves stuck between the absence or presence of the missing person. Groups need to address the space in between these two concepts.

Several FFMPU clients have expressed interest in being part of a client specific group, and the experience of FFMPU counsellors is "that there are many families of long term missing persons keen to ensure that other families are well supported."⁶ This formed the basis for research.

This project considered the theoretical perspectives of various group work models, the approaches of international organisations in the missing persons field towards groups, the current services offered locally by organisations in related trauma sectors and the needs and perspectives of families.

The project was comprised of the following elements:

1. A review of Australian and overseas literature and related research;
2. A research survey for families and friends of missing persons;
3. Consultations with key stakeholders (Australian and international) in the form of interviews and attendance at support groups;
4. Reference to Victims of Crime Bureau, Attorney General's Department of NSW.

These research methods allowed for a review of current services, and for consultation with families and stakeholders concerning an appropriate model of group work to address this gap in service delivery.

GROUP WORK

DEFINITION

Barker defines group work as occurring when “small numbers of people who share similar interests or common problems convene regularly and engage in activities designed to achieve certain objectives.”⁷

In an agency context, group work may be understood as “an orientation and method of social work intervention.”⁸ As a process of helping, groups are based on values of “autonomy, interdependence and responsibility;”⁹ and principles of empowerment, “cooperation, freedom of participation, and the value of individualisation.”¹⁰

One can see that “these objectives place group work as foundational to the social work paradigm.”¹¹ Alongside the ethics of social work practice, the theoretical basis upon which a group is formed and subsequently functions may strongly influence the group process.

FFMPU has defined group work as a space for families to come together and explore the impact of missing on their lives. The groups will provide both practical and therapeutic intervention that might help people cope better with their ambiguous loss.

Supporting those who are left behind, a national counselling framework for health care professionals used by FFMPU to support clients, draws on theories of crisis intervention, strengths-based practice and narrative therapy, whilst acknowledging the need for a multi-disciplinary approach. These theoretical perspectives would similarly inform a group process.

The key themes of the counselling framework might be applied to group work as follows:

- **REANIMATION:** Whilst participants will acknowledge the common purpose of coming together, the goal will be to look at the ways in which people can live as families first, not just as families of missing people.
- **A CELEBRATION SO FAR:** The group will provide a space for discussion about the lack of rituals to acknowledge an unresolved loss. It is envisaged that the group will provide a space to talk openly about the missing person and to give a voice back to those people who may have been silenced by their experiences.
- **A TRAUMA TIMELINE:** Whilst the group will not focus entirely on the emotional challenges of missing, the group may be able to help participants discover the ways in which they have coped with previous traumas as a guide to the ways in which they can live with an unresolved loss.
- **A PROTECTED PLACE:** Some families of missing persons have found that to live with their loss they need to compartmentalise their sadness and rawness to survive day to day. The group in itself will be a protected place where ‘missing’ can be dissected, explored and shared.
- **OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH:** The loss experienced by families of missing persons can create new ways of living and the group might provide an opportunity to harness new skills that families never thought they had.

For more information about the national counselling framework please visit:
www.missingpersons.gov.au/supporting

MODELS OF GROUP WORK

In contemporary social work, theorists have conceptualised group work differently, into separate and often overlapping categories. Classifications of group types and the labelling of different models highlight the importance of group purpose.

Papell and Rothman (1966) outlined three social work models of group work:

1. The social goals model, focusing on the group “as a demonstration of commitment to democratic principles of participation and collective action to achieve social change;”¹²
2. The remedial model, “conceptualised as an intervention strategy in parallel with case work and community work;”¹³ and
3. The reciprocal model, or mutual aid group, focusing on “the relationships amongst members and their connections with the social environment.”¹⁴

Shulman’s (1997) influential analysis categorises groups based on content, as follows:¹⁵

1. Support and rehabilitation groups;
2. Growth and education groups;
3. Task and action groups; and
4. Recapitulation and restitution groups.

Alternatively, social work groups may be classified as being either treatment or task oriented. Toseland and Rivas (2001)¹⁶ describe treatment groups to include the following: support groups, educational groups, growth groups, therapy groups and socialisation groups; whilst task groups are said to focus on either the needs of clients, organisations or communities.

Within these different paradigms, “some group types overlap as they are designed to meet multiple purposes.”¹⁷ The objectives of the group, identified by the worker in collaboration with clients, “influence all of the processes that follow;”¹⁸ indicating the appropriate models of group work to achieve those aims, and guiding decisions on the group’s structure and the content of the sessions.

As there is no current group service or precedent in the Australian context, it is anticipated that a combination of these models will inform the development of a group work service appropriate to families and friends of missing persons.

COMPONENTS OF GROUPS

Groups can be described as an “element of social work which goes on within, and through, interactional processes and structures.”¹⁹ The environment in which this occurs may differ according to group composition and size; open or closed membership; location, frequency and duration of meetings; group leadership, rules and decision making processes.

- **GROUP COMPOSITION AND SIZE:** Involves considerations of age, gender, race, personality and needs in relation to best achieving the goals of the group. It is important to balance group differences and cohesion based on ‘common ground’ in order to maximise individual growth and sharing. The number of participants should be determined according to the purpose of the group, and the leader’s capacity to monitor group dynamic and follow up needs.
- **OPEN OR CLOSED MEMBERSHIP:** Refers to whether the group will “exist over a predetermined period of time with predetermined activities and a fixed membership.”²⁰ This is commonly determined according to “both the group’s purpose and the characteristics of potential participants.”²¹

- ▶ **LOCATION, FREQUENCY AND DURATION:** Decisions regarding these factors “must draw on common sense, the experience of the agency, and the literature, and all must be related to group purpose.”²² The place for meeting should be comfortable, private and easily accessible. The timing of the group may be determined by availability of clients and the leader, and may also depend on whether there is a set group program.
- ▶ **GROUP LEADERSHIP:** Depending on the needs of clients, leadership may remain with the group worker, or be shared with other participants. The role of group workers may be varied, and commonly involve facilitating the development of the group through various stages. It is common for groups to formulate rules and clarify decision-making processes together.

GROUP WORK AND TECHNOLOGY

Modern technology provides alternatives to the traditional face-to-face model of group work. Bank et al. write that “technology-augmented intervention was developed to a) provide caregivers with access to social support, information and resources; b) reduce isolation; and c) overcome the multiple logistical barriers that prevent many caregivers from attending face-to-face support groups.”²³ According to progress in technology, different group formats have evolved to respond to different client needs.

Telephone groups

Telephone conferencing is often used in the social work profession to engage clients whose interaction with counselling services may otherwise be limited due to geographical difficulties, limited mobility or illness, the constant role of care giving or general hesitance to attend.

Alongside practical advantages, Grumet and Evans et al. argue that “telephone interventions offer a number of attractive features for certain clients. These include: the relative privacy; decreased formality; feeling of anonymity; equalization of power and control between the therapist and the client; and the expectation of verbal as opposed to non-verbal cues.”²⁴

It must be noted, however, that certain aspects of counselling may be compromised due to challenges to concentration, a lack of visual indicators and other technical difficulties.

Online groups

Group work may also be practiced over the Internet, in the form of online discussion forums, group conferences or moderated bulletin boards.

Kurtz writes that online groups are accessible, anonymous, they can take place at home, one “can communicate at any time, as and when one needs or wants to ... and exchanges can be interrupted by other tasks without affecting the quality of the communication.”²⁵ This method of support may be particularly effective when working with a group as people “can write messages of unlimited length and explore issues in depth because they do not compete with each other for ‘air time’.”²⁶ Participation can be “thoughtfully prepared off line before being posted”²⁷ and may therefore be more meaningful; and the group interaction may be more honest as one’s “clothes, car, appearance, age, race, accent, gender and social status are invisible.”²⁸

Potential challenges to this form of group work include the need for technical skills which may restrict access, false information may be posted, it is more difficult to judge honesty, confidentiality may be limited and that “glitches in new software and the occasional erratic performance of ... technology can strain the patience of people already emotionally stressed.”²⁹ The time and resources required may present a further challenge; FFMPU is a small service and may not have the staff availability required to facilitate an online group.

GROUP SERVICES IN THE AUSTRALIAN MISSING PERSONS FIELD

SERVICES SPECIFICALLY FOR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF MISSING PERSONS

In September 2003, FFMPU entered into consultation with Mission Australia to form a telephone support group, *Missing Link*. A teleconference model and promotional material was developed however the number of interested and suitable candidates remained extremely low (under 4 people). Mission Australia found that clients presented highly diverse needs, which were considered inappropriate to address within a group. In April 2004, Mission Australia recommended that no support group be conducted and the project was discontinued.³⁰

This currently remains as an identified gap in service delivery as there are no groups available to meet the needs of this unique client group.

SERVICES IN RELATED SECTORS

This project reviewed services that focus on interrelated issues or experiences that are common to families and friends of missing persons. The project also considered services available to populations at high risk of going missing, being the elderly, youth and people with a mental illness.³¹ Suggestions have been included that relate to FFMPU.

Grief, loss and trauma

Suicide

SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT GROUP (SBSG)³²: Established ten years ago by the Department of Forensic Medicine Sydney, the SBSG is an open, counsellor facilitated support group for people (aged 18 years+) who have lost someone to suicide. The group is held one evening a month from 7:00pm to 9:00pm, at a non-clinical venue. Meeting in a social environment such as a Returned and Services League (RSL) club has been found to increase the attendance of men, as well as women. SBSG noted that there has never been an issue concerning the responsible service of alcohol at the venue.

Four to six weeks after a suicide, an information pack is sent to families, which includes information on SBSG. All family members may attend the group, as the SBSG understands grieving as occurring in a family context. SBSG are mindful of tension within families and in such circumstances attempt to invite people they feel would be appropriate.

Everyone attending the group signs in at the door. In the centre of the room is a table with a memorial book of photos, next to a lit candle. People are invited to add a photo to the book.

The meeting begins with housekeeping matters, an orientation to the evening and reading of the group rules. These are: confidentiality; respect; a commitment to only share one's own experiences without advice or an agenda; and a recognition that the counsellors are there to facilitate the group process. People are then invited to introduce themselves. This is followed by one minute of silence to remember lost loved ones.

The psycho-educational component of the meeting then begins, with one of the counsellors talking on a specific issue or theme relating to suicide and bereavement. All members then split into smaller groups, each facilitated by a counsellor for approximately 45 minutes to discuss thoughts and feelings relating to the topic of the session, or other issues. There is always one group for newcomers who are recently bereaved.

The group then comes together again and shares what they discussed. This is particularly beneficial for the newcomers who are able to hear from others who have had similar experiences to themselves. Towards the end of the meeting, the group reflects on what the session has been like. The counsellors then leave the room, encouraging others to stay and talk between themselves. Follow up calls are made to all newcomers or to anyone the counsellors are concerned about.

SBSG identified the challenges faced by counsellors in facilitating groups outside of work hours. The issues discussed can feel more personal as there are fewer boundaries between counsellors and clients, particularly at a non-clinical venue. The intensity of extreme grief can also be draining on counsellors.

Other challenges noted were the need to screen people before they come to the group to see if they are appropriate, and that although the meeting details are not advertised sometimes people turn up without having made prior contact with SBSG. SBSG ensures that there is always an extra counsellor available to act as 'runner' and to take someone out of the group for discussion if necessary.

Lifeline has recently been granted funding to run closed groups, in conjunction with SBSG.

Homicide

HOMICIDE VICTIMS' SUPPORT GROUP (HVSG)³³: The HVSG was established in 1993 "to provide support, counselling and information for families and friends affected by homicide in NSW."³⁴ Alongside one-on-one counselling, telephone and court support, 'get togethers' are held across the state, on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. These group meetings are advertised in the HVSG newsletter. Group membership is closed, as all members are required to be cleared by police prior to attending, however thereafter the group has an open structure and members may choose to attend when they like. Groups range in size from 10 to 50 people per group, with attendees ranging in age and the length of time since their loved one was killed.

The groups have no fixed duration, commonly lasting two and a half hours, and are held in community venues such as the Parramatta RSL, where HVSG provides a meal for members. People sign in at the door, and then sit in a large U shape, a few rows deep. The meeting commences with the reading out of birthdays and anniversaries of departed loved ones. The focus of the meeting is on emotional support, and people are given an opportunity to introduce themselves and share their story or what is happening for them at that time.

In Parramatta, a guest speaker is invited to every second meeting, which is held at the Police Headquarters. These sessions focus on practical support and advocacy. Families are invited to submit questions prior to the meeting, giving the speaker a chance to prepare and provide information on the day. The get togethers are facilitated by HVSG counsellors and trained volunteers.

HVSG also coordinate weekend camps, for men and women separately, and for youth. No two members of the same family may be present at these events.

HOMICIDE SURVIVORS SUPPORT AFTER MURDER GROUP³⁵: The focus of Support after Murder Group is for homicide survivors to get together socially, and to discuss concerns and areas for change in relation to homicide.

The group currently meets in Wollongong on a monthly basis, and approximately 15 people attend. Inquires concerning safety are made with police before someone joins the group. The Support after Murder Group also organises a weekend gathering for survivors of homicide once every year.

Peter Rolfe, President of the organisation, noted the importance of focusing on issues and experiences other than the homicide. In his experience, groups are most beneficial when they do not adhere to a formal structure but rather when they run according to how people feel comfortable.

Mental health

SANE³⁶: SANE Australia is a “national charity working for a better life for people affected by mental illness – through campaigning, education and research.”³⁷

SANE currently offers training to mental health, bereavement and helpline services about the needs of families who have a loved one with mental illness who is missing or has died by suicide.

SCHIZOPHRENIA FELLOWSHIP³⁸: The Schizophrenia Fellowship is a “non-profit, community-based organisation working in the field of mental illness. The Schizophrenia Fellowship is committed to improving the circumstances and welfare of people living with schizophrenia, their relatives and carers, and professionals working in the area.”³⁹

The organisation has been offering support groups since 1985, and there are currently more than 40 groups running across both rural and metropolitan NSW. The groups are led by volunteers who have experienced, or been impacted by mental illness. Anyone can attend a group, including people with a mental illness, families and friends, health professionals and interested members of the public. There are also specific groups for carers, and other groups that focus on specific mental illnesses. Most meetings are two hours long, and are held on a monthly basis. There is no commitment to attend.

The focus of the meeting depends on the group. Some groups have guest speakers who discuss medication, advocacy or ways of coping with a mental illness. Other groups focus on social activities.

The elderly

ALZHEIMER'S AUSTRALIA⁴⁰: Alzheimer's Australia is the peak support and advocacy body for the 500,000 Australians living with dementia. The organisation facilitates a seven-week program called *Living With Memory Loss* for people living with early stage dementia and their families. In 2008, 35 *Living With Memory Loss* programs were conducted throughout NSW, and two special *Younger Onset* programs were held in Sydney.

Sessions run for two hours. In a group format, participants can tell their story of memory loss, reflect on the impact of their diagnosis, develop an understanding of the importance of self care, enhance their skills for communicating, learn techniques for problem solving and extend their knowledge about legal and financial issues.

Youth

TWENTY 10⁴¹: Twenty 10 is a “community-based, non-profit state-wide organisation that provides and promotes opportunities, choices and support to young people (aged 12-26 years) who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, same-sex attracted and/or gender questioning, their families and communities.”⁴² The service offers case management, telephone support and training, and social support groups are held in Newtown and Hornsby.

‘ShoutOUT Newtown’ is held weekly on Saturdays from 12:00pm to 4:00pm at Twenty10, and the Hornsby group ‘GAL@H (Gays and Lesbians at Hornsby)’ is held fortnightly on Wednesday evenings in partnership with Hornsby Council.

The focus of these groups is social and educational. Food is provided, and then the group does an activity such as a film project, has a planned discussion, a guest speaker, or goes on an outing. Sometimes workshops are held on relationship issues, sexual health, 'coming out' and other topics. Discussion is generally informal, often evolving during games and activities. The Saturday group normally has 10-15 people attend, and is run by a group worker with the help of a trained volunteer. Membership is flexible and open to anyone within Twenty10's client group.

Other groups offered are *GenderQ*, a more structured discussion group held monthly for people questioning and exploring their gender; and a men and women's 'coming out' group facilitated by the Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service, who work closely with Twenty10, for an older demographic.

Twenty10 is hoping to establish a therapeutic group shortly, which will run over a 6-8 week block.

Victims of Crime Bureau – Attorney General's Department of NSW

The Victims of Crime Bureau were consulted based on their expertise and skills in trauma response and group work. The Bureau suggested that groups be run on a particular topic for several sessions, over a short period of time. The rationale for a group to be run over a set number of sessions is to enable the group to bond and to potentially create a naturally forming support network. Isolation and stigma have been identified as a common issue for families of missing persons. It was felt that groups should be held more often than monthly to maintain momentum and commitment.

The Bureau discussed the importance of creating a safe space for members in order not to re-traumatise people and to ensure that support between group sessions is also available. A mini-assessment for intake into the group was suggested to help identify whether individuals are appropriate for the group, and to be conscious of family relationships.

The Bureau recommended that time be allocated within the group program for topics not directly relating to 'missing,' such as self-care. This was considered important for group bonding and may also be a way of supporting those people who do not want to face the topic of missing on that particular day. Group topics might be generated by the group, alongside suggestions by facilitators based on common themes that emerge in individual counselling.

It may be appropriate to incorporate group activities into group sessions. These activities could be related to producing a resource or working on promotion material regarding awareness of missing persons issues, as well activities that are used in emotional release therapies such as artwork. It was also suggested that the group program end with a celebration of commitment that group members have made to attending.

The Bureau noted the importance of not comparing personal traumas, and the role of the group worker as facilitator in this regard.

It was acknowledged that although attendance may be low initially, it is important to give members a voice and control over group content and rules. Members could be consulted about other series of topics for future groups.

NOTE: FFMPU contacted other peak agencies to assist in the development of this report. A number of agencies did not respond within the timeframe therefore their opinions have not been included in this report.

OVERSEAS GROUP SERVICES FOR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF MISSING PERSONS

The following overseas agencies were consulted in relation to the group services they provide to families and friends of missing persons, and the perceived benefits and challenges to group work in this field from their experiences.

JACOB WETTERLING RESOURCE CENTER (JWRC) (MINNESOTA, USA): JWRC aims to “protect children from sexual exploitation and abduction through a combined program of prevention education and victim’s assistance.”⁴³

JWRC facilitate annual group gatherings for families and friends of missing persons. “Family Gatherings give participants the opportunity to build support networks and friendships with other families who have experienced similar losses. Through this gathering, victim families receive emotional support, coping strategies and education related to victim family rights.”⁴⁴ These groups “create safe environments for participants to share thoughts or feelings regarding the crime committed, the persons involved in response to their case, changes of legal policies and practices, and the reaction of the community.”⁴⁵

These group events may be beneficial for families as they “create opportunities to remember those who are missing and to normalise the process through honest and realistic discussion.”⁴⁶

NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING ADULTS (NCMA) (ARIZONA, USA): NCMA operates as the “national clearinghouse for missing adults; providing services and coordination between various government agencies, law enforcement, media, and families.”⁴⁷

NCMA “pioneered the online support group model for families of missing persons”⁴⁸, with their private online support group called *Hope2Support*. Group membership is “restricted to family members and friends with a loved one registered with the NCMA. This is so that thoughts and questions posted are shared privately amongst those who have a common understanding. The general public is not able to access the board.”⁴⁹ In 2005, the online support group had “almost 300 participants, which was significantly larger than attendance at face-to-face support groups.”⁵⁰

The group “gives families the opportunity to share their thoughts, emotions, and positive ways of coping with not knowing where a loved one may be.” “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 NMCA) and generally discuss the frustrations and achievements relevant to their search.”⁵¹

NCMA also hosts bi-monthly support group meetings from the organisation’s headquarters. The group is focused on outside activities that aim to empower families of missing persons, work on team building skills and strengthen communication between families. Often public speakers are invited, and media may attend.⁵²

NCMA suggested “families were constantly faced with the reality and trauma of unresolved loss, and that they may not have wanted to revisit the issue with other families who mirrored their experience.”⁵³ This may be a significant challenge to group attendance.

PROJECT JASON (NEBRASKA, USA)⁵⁴: Project Jason is a non-profit organisation that aims to "increase public awareness of missing people through a variety of outreach and educational activities."⁵⁵

Project Jason provides an online, private group for verified family members of any relationship to a missing person. The group started in July 2007, and currently has 64 members. Members can share their personal stories, seek the advice of those who have been there, ask questions of a counsellor and learn about awareness opportunities. The group "links families and professionals together to provide support,"⁵⁶ by inviting "special guests to every second 'chat'" focusing on different topics such as loss, legal issues, law enforcement etc."⁵⁷

Kelly Jolkowski, mother of missing Jason Jolkowski and founder and president of Project Jason, advised FFMPU in relation to group work based on her experience in the sector. Kelly identified the challenges to the online forum, commenting:

"Some members have a hard time with figuring out the mechanics of posting. With the popularity of FaceBook, MySpace, and other social networking sites, we have lost most of the traffic. There was not much to begin with, as most family members who use the internet had already found friends on those (general social networking) sites and seem to be 'stuck' there. We have not yet been able to determine why they would rather their discussions about their cases and feelings be public, nor why they get 'stuck'. We see family members only communicating on those sites, even sending press releases within, but not outside of it."

Kelly also noted her knowledge of several "in person support groups" that had:

"... folded because of a lack of attendance. In the beginning, many came, but as time went by, they stopped coming. Perhaps those groups weren't run effectively, and the attendees may have felt they were just hashing over the same thing. I don't know, but that's a guess."

NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING AND EXPLOITED CHILDREN (NCMEC)⁵⁸: NCMEC's 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."⁵⁹

NCMEC do not provide a group service, but offer a mutual aid model of support for families. NCMEC facilitate a support network by telephone on a one on one basis, for families and friends of missing children. The service is run by volunteers who have personally experienced having someone missing. NCMEC advise that volunteers need to be screened carefully in order to avoid re-traumatisation.

This model recognises the benefit of combining "professional intervention with the support of other families of missing persons."⁶⁰ This may be relevant to group work in the Australian context as the experience of FFMPU indicates "that there are many families of long term missing persons keen to ensure that other families are well supported. Perhaps by mixing the two skills sets together a new blend of support can be provided."⁶¹

ASSOCIATION DES FAMILIES DE PERSONNES ASSASSINEES OU DISPARUES (AFPAD): Murdered or Missing Persons Family Association (Quebec, Canada): AFPAD acts on behalf of families, provides services and emotional support, promotes victims rights, and supports prevention initiatives.⁶²

"AFPAD arrange bi-monthly family gatherings to ensure 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."⁶³ Groups are held on Saturday evenings, and membership is limited to families and invited professionals. There are between 10 and 20 families in each group. AFPAD also have quarterly meetings, for a full day, with professionals discussing specific themes.⁶⁴

THE RACHEL FOUNDATION FOR FAMILY REINTEGRATION, USA: "The Rachel Foundation provides reintegration programs and services for parents and children whose bonds of love and affection have been damaged or destroyed by abduction and/or alienation."⁶⁵

Two volunteers facilitate an online support group for parents. Parents use a password to access the online support forum and use a pseudonym for reasons of confidentiality. The facilitator reviews and edits messages as they come in and then sends postings onto the group. It is not a message from one parent to another but from one parent to the group.⁶⁶

IDENTIFIED NEEDS AND ISSUES

GROUP WORK SURVEY

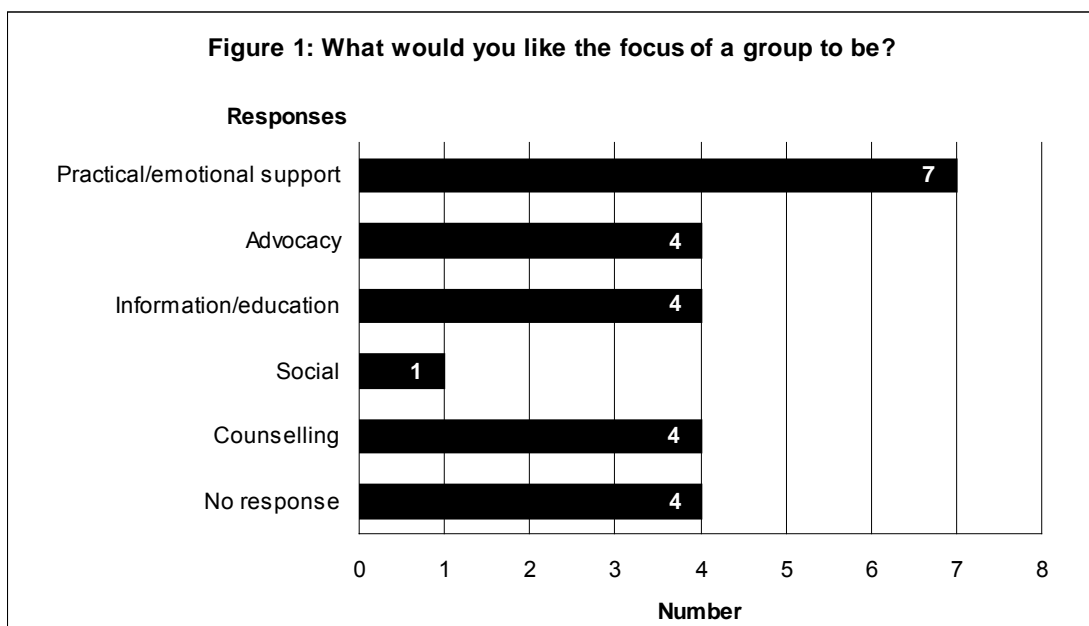
A survey (see Appendix 2) was distributed to the 27 attendees of the Forum for Families and Friends of Missing Persons, organised by FFMPU and held in Sydney on 4 April 2009. Overall feedback from the Forum indicated that people wanted an avenue for them to meet and discuss common issues. The survey was also sent by email to 51 clients of FFMPU. The survey outlined what group work is, and asked questions about interest in attending a group; the structure, timing and focus of a potential group; what a group program might include; and barriers to attending.

Twelve responses were received, representing 15 per cent.

- 66% of the responses received were from females.
- 50% were aged 60+ years.
- 58% were parents of missing persons.
- All the responses received indicated long-term missing cases.⁶⁷

Of those that responded, 42 per cent had attended a support group previously (however no indication was given as to what type of group.) Fifty per cent of the participants expressed an interest in attending a group for families and friends of missing persons. Reasons given as to why they were not interested in attending included that they felt they were 'past it'; that it wouldn't be useful; that they are psychologically managing the Coronial process which 'needs a lot of focus'; and that they want 'to have a break from it all'.

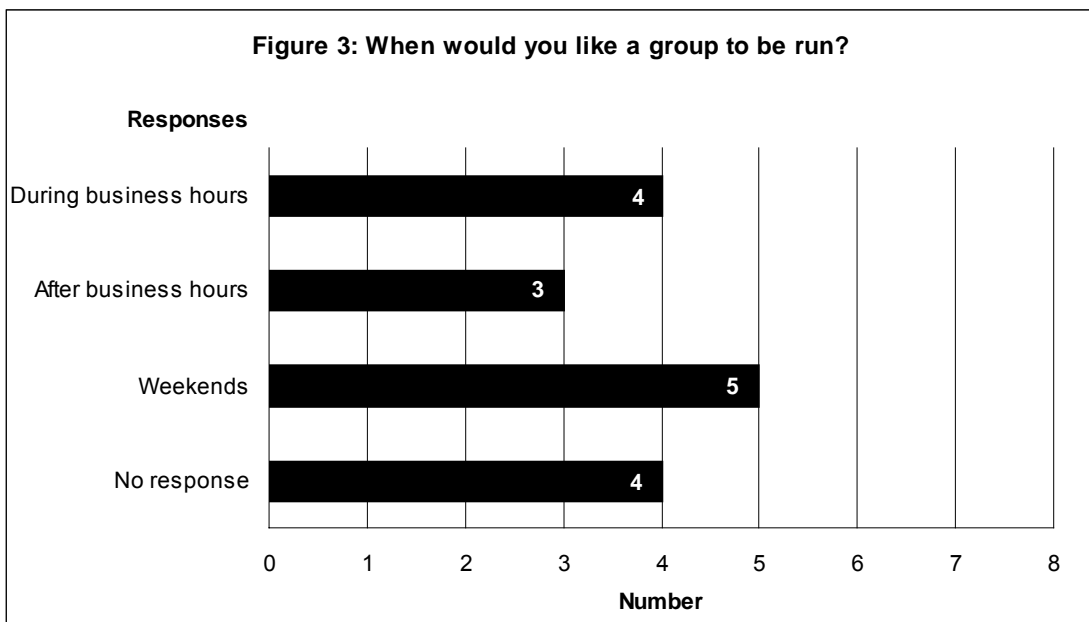
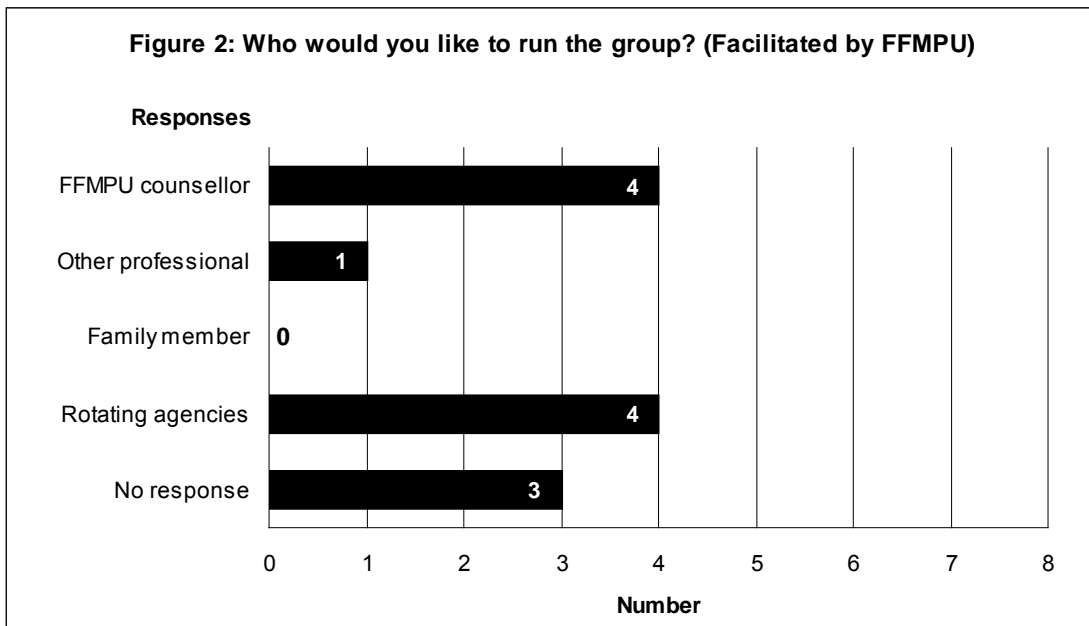
Figure 1 shows that 'Practical and emotional support' was the most selected option for the group focus. There was also significant (and equal) interest in the focus being on advocacy, information/education and counselling. (**Note:** participants could select more than one option.)



Responses indicated a considerable interest in online groups, as well as a group adopting various formats.

Cost of travel was identified as one of the more significant barriers to attending, and only one person selected emotional triggers as an obstacle. A comment was made that “groups being dominated by agendas rather than a focus on family members” would impede attendance.

Figure 2 shows there was equal interest expressed in having FFMPU lead the group as there was in having rotating leadership, while Figure 3 shows the responses regarding location of a group also reflected equal interest in FFMPU hosting and having rotating locations.



It must be noted that of the responses received, there were a significant number of blank responses, and that the responses received were often ambiguous. For example, people said all relationships to a missing person should be included in the same group, and in the next question concerning potential groupings, indicated that all relationships should be kept separate. Results were also difficult to quantify.

Participants were asked for ideas in relation to what topics should be included in a group program. Responses included:

- trauma and its effects
- avenues of investigation
- disappearances of different kinds
- mental health issues
- avenues for support
- advocacy for changes in practice, especially policing, and review of privacy laws
- coping at different stages of the timeline
- the emotional, physical and psychological effects of having someone missing.

People also expressed that a group should allow for:

- people to tell their stories when they have the need
- the opportunity for people to be able to express criticism related to their experiences
- the agenda to be derived from group interests.

A participant commented that involvement in a support group facilitated by FFMPU would be 'a far more efficient and effective involvement than in **** (a non-government advocacy group).

COMPARISON TO PREVIOUS RESEARCH IN THE MISSING PERSONS SECTOR

In 2002 the Attorney General's Department of NSW released a report entitled *Support needs of family and friends of long term missing persons: Towards effective assistance for those who grieve*.⁶⁸ The study was partly informed by a questionnaire, which received 65 responses (57%). The following findings are relevant to group work⁶⁹:

Table 1: Would it have helped to have contact with people in similar circumstances?

	No.	(%)
Yes	45	(58)
No	26	(34)
Unsure	3	(4)
No response	3	(4)

Table 2: Would you attend a support group if one were available?

	No.	(%)
Yes	40	(52)
No	29	(38)
Unsure	3	(4)
No response	5	(6)

This is consistent with the outcomes of the 2009 FFMPU Group Work Survey, with approximately 50 per cent of participants having expressed interest in attending and 33 per cent saying no.

<i>Type of support service respondents would access if available</i>	Yes (%)	No (%)
Support groups of people sharing experiences of missing persons	53	28
Information and education sessions convened by a professional	60	20
Informal "drop in" groups	25	39
Telephone network	43	34
E-mail/ chat room	23	40

* Percentages not totalling 100 due to nil response, or unsure.

In response to the 2009 FFMPU Group Work Survey, no interest was expressed in a telephone network independently of other support options. A similar interest was indicated to the 2002 report in regards to online support. In comparison to the 2002 response to informal groups, only one participant in the 2009 FFMPU Group Work Survey expressed interest in a social group.

The 2002 report indicated that several people "believed that there was a need for support groups, counselling or advice on legal matters and case follow-up, but that it was too late for them to benefit from services now." Families expressed this same sentiment in 2009.

The earlier report noted, "it is of the utmost importance to ensure that leaders and facilitators of groups do not become burnt out, as they are expected to be in a long term position. At the same time, family members may need to make time for themselves and for their own needs. They must not feel that the group becomes an inescapable burden. It may help to reduce this risk by ensuring that there are two facilitators rather than one." This echoes the comments made by people overseas who have experience of groups for missing persons.

WHAT MIGHT WORK?

“It would be helpful, but very difficult to get people to go.”⁷⁰

Part of the challenge in developing a group work model for families of missing people is the potential for people’s situations to change suddenly and possibly with traumatic outcomes. FFMPU’s aim in establishing pilot groups for families is to both inform the unit about what might work, as well as creating a space for those who need support presently whilst they live with the loss of a missing person.

The counselling service within FFMPU has been in existence for five years and within that time the ways in which families have received therapeutic intervention has been modelled and developed through simply asking families what works for them. It is anticipated that groups offered by the unit will be established in the same way – by creating a space for families to co-facilitate their own journey through ambiguous loss and by plotting the outcomes with families.

ADVANTAGES

There are numerous benefits of group work, reinforcing the importance and potential significance of groups as a helping strategy. Hepworth et al. summarise that “forces for change include the capacity of groups to instil hope and encouragement as well as their capacity to universalise experiences, experience unity, break down isolation, experience altruism and the satisfaction of helping others, grapple with existential questions and learn coping skills for life experiences, and experience healing through cohesion and mutuality.”⁷¹

As one can expect there are also various challenges that may arise throughout the group process, which may be harmful for participants. Careful consideration in the planning stage of group purpose, appropriate membership, the negotiation of potential obstacles to the group, such as transport, and the establishment of accepted rules are necessary for the group to be effective in achieving its purpose. Other issues that may require careful attention and management include: stages of group development; leadership; conflict and power relations; and the balancing of individual and group needs.

Families and friends of missing persons might benefit from sharing their stories with others who can relate to the particular trauma of having someone missing; learning from related agencies and from other people’s experiences about searching and the legal processes that follow such as estate management or Coroner’s Court proceedings; and discussing how others learnt to cope and function with not knowing what happened to their loved one. Group work could provide this emotional and practical support simultaneously for these clients to whom there are minimal services currently available.

CHALLENGES

Challenges in conducting group work with families and friends of missing persons might be the effect of emotional triggers on someone’s coping and their ability to commit to attending; as well as the demanding physical and psychological aspects of engaging with the trauma of having someone missing. Some families feel that their cases are too sensitive for them to contemplate meeting others who have been waiting for years, some decide on the day that they cannot face the emotional turmoil of their loss and others are inhibited by geographic or financial boundaries. For these reasons, events arranged for families of missing people often have low attendance.

Other difficulties involve the possibility of a case being resolved during the group process; and that client situations may vary according to how long the person has been missing, the different relationships people have with that person and the potential reasons for their disappearance.

These diverse and sensitive circumstances may impact differently on group members as they relate to their own experiences.

There is also the potential for different members of the same family to be attending the same group.

The 2002 report⁷² noted that “providing a support network flexible enough to allow different people to take a leadership role, yet structured enough for this to occur smoothly over a long period of time, remains a challenge.”

Kelly Jolkowski indicated some challenges faced from her experience of groups in this sector: “Families who have a grasp on their own coping strategies stay away from other families and just rely on their families and friends, and perhaps just a few carefully chosen families of missing persons. They say they get “dragged down with the negativity”, and don’t feel meeting other families is helpful. There are also people who only see their own case and their own problems. They don’t ask about anyone else and always want the ‘floor’. That’s also a big turn-off in a group dynamic, whether in person or online. Anyone present who is introverted will probably just move on.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Group work in the missing persons sector represents a need that is not currently being met. Families and friends of missing persons have consistently reinforced this need during initial contact with the unit, and in counselling, and in response to research surveys.

Groups are recognised by overseas ‘missing’ agencies as an effective support strategy for families. Although several NSW services related to, and affected by, missing issues provide group work, these groups are not necessarily suitable or helpful for people experiencing the trauma of ambiguous loss.

Some of the outcomes reflect the results of the research survey, discussions with service providers and the resources of FFMPU. The recommendations are:

- 1. A PREFERENCE FOR FACE-TO-FACE GROUPS:** Telephone support groups have previously been found ineffective. Consultation with overseas agencies revealed that some online groups have worked and others have not. Families expressed interest in face-to-face groups, and given the success of other trauma services with face-to-face groups, this appears to be an appropriate model of group work to meet the practical and emotional needs of families of missing persons.
- 2. THE NEED FOR AN OPEN GROUP STRUCTURE:** An open group structure means that people are invited to attend whenever they like, and do not have to commit to attending beforehand. Those with experience in the missing persons sector have reinforced the need for flexibility when working with families who are experiencing trauma. This is important in order to allow for people to choose not to engage with the complex issues surrounding ‘missing’ when they are not in the space to do so. This may also account for the typically low attendance of families at missing persons events. It is recommended that an open group structure that allows people to attend when they want to would be most effective.
- 3. THE NEED FOR A FIXED DURATION:** FFMPU aims to assist people to develop self-care skills so that they may be empowered to cope with having a loved one missing. It is recommended that the group program be of a fixed duration, for example 6-8 weeks, in order to prevent the group process from becoming a repetitive cycle that may re-traumatise families. A fixed duration would ensure the group had a specific focus and would enable families to move forward after the group has ended. They may wish to re-engage with groups at a later stage.

4. **LOCATION:** Due to budgetary constraints, groups would be held at FFMPU in the Parramatta Justice Precinct, with a review after the first completed group work program.
5. **TIME:** Groups would be held on weeknights for two hours, from 6:00pm to 8:00pm. Meetings would be held weekly for 6-8 weeks, depending on the group program. The group would meet at the same time and place every session.
6. **A PREFERENCE FOR PEOPLE WITH DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIPS TO THE MISSING PERSON TO BE IN THE SAME GROUP:** Other services have adopted this structure effectively, and the 2009 FFMPU Group Work Survey results indicate that families would prefer for groups to be inclusive, meaning all relationships to the missing person including parents, siblings, spouses and friends. Missing is an issue that affects families as a whole, and therefore groups being open to people of varying relationships to the missing person would enable a more holistic support process.
7. **A DUAL FOCUS ON PRACTICAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT:** The 2009 FFMPU Group Work Survey outcomes reflected that families wanted groups to focus on both practical and emotional support. One method of incorporating this dual focus into groups is to have either a focus on practical or emotional support, with guest speakers attending every other session. Alternatively, SBSG use a combined psycho-educational model, by addressing a certain topic and then engaging in smaller groups to discuss and debrief any issues that arise. It is recommended that this approach of a combined focus on practical and emotional support would be more suitable for a group of fixed duration and perhaps more inclusive of both men and women.
8. **ROLE OF FACILITATORS:** It is essential to create a safe space within groups, by outlining rules concerning confidentiality and by giving a clear explanation of the program for each session. There is potential to incorporate a ritual such as lighting a candle or having a photo book in the centre of the circle. The facilitator would be responsible for providing a structure to the session, developing and facilitating a program based on client needs, and monitoring group dynamics and any additional support needs that arise during the group. It is recommended that there be an intake process in order to appropriately screen and orientate group members to group work processes, and that support be made available between sessions as needed.

With consideration of the insights gained during this research, the following model is proposed for the establishment of a group service by FFMPU:

A group program on a specific issue relevant to missing persons, held weekly for six weeks. The program would include both practical and emotional support, not always focusing on the issue of missing. The group program would be developed according to the needs and ideas of group members.

Groups will aim to support families in exploring new opportunities for growth within their journey of having someone missing.

This would be followed by approximately 8-10 weeks before another group would commence on a separate topic. The group would be open in structure, for a fixed duration. Three such modules would be offered every year.

The program will be evaluated in February 2010 after the first groups have concluded.

FFMPU is open to the possibility that groups may not be suitable for all people experiencing the loss of a loved one but anticipates that through the unit's multi-skills in individual counselling, practical assistance and group work interventions families may find a combination that assists them in learning to develop a tolerance for the ambiguity they experience; that is our goal.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: REPORT ON MISSING LINK TELEPHONE SUPPORT GROUP 2004

Report on Missing Link Telephone Support Group

*Submitted by Mission Australia Counselling Services,
December 2004.*

Activities undertaken

September 2003

- Discussions regarding the development of a teleconference support group for families and friends of a missing person held with consultant (Pauline Arkell) and the manager of Mission Australia's Counselling Service.

October 2003

- Consultation regarding training took place with organisations offering teleconference services including Cancer Council, Alzheimer's Association and Carers NSW.
- Two-day teleconferencing training program run through Carers NSW completed by Pauline Arkell and Mission Australia staff (Anne Smith).
- Pauline Arkell worked on development of draft teleconference model.
- Manager of Mission Australia's Counselling Service and Pauline Arkell, met with Leonie Jacques to discuss the proposed model and aims and objectives of *Missing Link* teleconference support group.
- Unless specified, all following actions were completed by Mission Australia consultant, Pauline Arkell.

November 2003

- Developed and designed promotional material (*Missing Link* brochure) (see attached).
- Developed and designed application/registration form (see attached).

December 2003

- Provided article for FFMPU Newsletter.

January 2004

- Coordinated mailout of *Missing Link* brochure to FFMPU members.
- Mission Australia staff and volunteers posted application/registration forms to interested parties contacting the service on the Victim Support Line.
- Provided article for Missing Persons Newsletter.

February 2004

- Attended FFMPU interagency meeting.
- Made phone contact with prospective group members who had returned registration forms.
- Liaised with Sarah Wayland, Counsellor FFMPU referring individual clients, where appropriate.

March 2004

- Designed evaluation form (see attached).
- Attended FFMPU committee meeting.
- Liaised with potential group members by phone to keep them updated.

April 2004

- Met with possible co-counsellor/group facilitator.
- Continued to contact potential group members by phone to keep them updated on group.
- Liaised with Sarah Wayland, Counsellor FFMPU, in relation to the group and individuals' responsibility.

Final outcome

Despite the above activities being conducted and the group promoted by our service, in April 2004, the numbers of interested and suitable candidates remained extremely low (never more than four). Further, within these low numbers were several clients presenting with highly diverse needs which were inappropriate to address or support within a group situation. These clients were referred to Sarah Wayland for individual support. Mission Australia subsequently recommended that no support group be conducted.

Jo Thomlinson
Acting Manager
Counselling Services
Mission Australia
December 2004

APPENDIX 2: GROUP WORK SURVEY 2009

Attached is a survey formulated by the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU). The survey's purpose is to explore whether or not support groups would be useful in terms of helping people live with the loss of a missing person.

This would be a 12-month program consisting of eight sessions. The group would meet every six weeks for two hours, and attendees would need to be aged 18 years and over.

No identifying information is being gathered and the results of the survey will only be used within FFMPU to assist in the provision of service delivery. If you have any concerns about the questions within this survey or the subject area please contact FFMPU coordinator on (02) 8688 5414.

We would appreciate if you could fill in this short questionnaire and hand it in at the Family Forum, or send it back in the reply-paid envelope provided, by 1 May 2009.

Here is some background information to assist you in completing the survey

What is group work?

Group work brings together people with a common challenge or life situations to provide support and information in a safe environment.

What types of groups are there?

Groups can be run in different ways – in person, over the phone and online.

The style of the group meetings are dependent on the group's purpose and what group members would like to achieve. A group might meet to gain information, develop certain skills, to discuss topics or issues, or to socialise.

Meetings are generally facilitated by professionals, and run according to a program focused on specific topics, information or skills. Groups can have 'open' or 'closed' membership and duration. Group members can decide together on the rules and leadership they would like the group to have.

Are groups all about emotional support?

No. Some groups may focus on counselling, however the group may also address access to practical support, advocacy or education.

Are there groups for families and friends of missing persons?

Overseas, particularly in the United States, there are group services specifically for families and friends of missing persons. These take the form of face-to-face meetings, family gatherings, online chat forums and telephone support, all considered to be effective and useful for meeting different needs.

In 2004, FFMPU initiated a telephone support group, which was later discontinued. There are currently no specific group services available in Australia for people left behind when someone goes missing.

How might a group help me?

People often find it useful to meet and learn from others who are experiencing similar situations to themselves. Together, with the facilitator, groups can be a great source of support. A group program can also facilitate learning, and access to information and resources.

1. Do you currently attend, or have you previously been part of a support group?

(please tick appropriate response)

No

Yes If yes, was this a positive experience? Why or why not?

.....
.....
.....

2. Are you interested in attending a group for families and friends of missing persons?

Yes

No If no, can you please share your reasons with us?

.....
.....
.....

(Please see comments and suggestions section on back page)

3. What type of group would be useful for you? *(please tick appropriate response)*

Face-to-face

Via telephone

Online

A mix of the above

4. If you would prefer a face-to-face group, where would you like it to be held?

(please tick appropriate response)

FFMPU

Rotating locations

Community venues (halls, parks)

5. What would you like the focus of a group to be? *(You can pick more than one)*

Practical and emotional support

Advocacy

Information/education

Social

Counselling

Other *(please specify)*

6. When would you like a group to be run?

During business hours

After business hours

Weekends

7. How big would you like a group to be?

- Small (up to 5 people)
- Medium (8 people)
- Large (12 people)

8. Should all relationships to a missing person be included in the same group?

- Yes
- No

9. If groups were run separately, what groupings should they be in?

- Men only
- Women only
- Parents of missing persons only
- Siblings of missing persons only
- Families and friends of a missing person who has been missing more than 6 months
- Families and friends of a missing person who has been missing less than 6 months
- Other service providers

10. Who would you like to run a group**?

- FFMPU counsellor
- Other counsellor/professional
- Family member
- Different (rotating) agencies**
- Facilitated by FFMPU.

11. What would be a barrier to you coming? (*You can pick more than one*)

- Cost of travel
- Emotional triggers
- The perceptions of your family/friends about groups
- Concern about what happens if your missing person investigation is resolved during the group process

12. What would you like a group program to cover?

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13. Any other comments or suggestions?

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DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Age:

- Less than 12 years
- 12 – 24 years
- 25 – 39 years
- 40 – 59 years
- Over 60 years

Gender:

- Male
- Female

Location:

- Sydney Metro
- Regional NSW
- Interstate

Relationship to the missing person:

- Parent
- Sibling
- Spouse/De facto
- Child
- Grandparent
- Other

Culture:

- Aboriginal
- Torres Straight Islander
- CALD
- Born overseas (*Please specify nationality*)

How long has the missing person been missing?.....

Thank you very much for your time and thoughtful responses. If you are happy to be contacted about your answers to the questionnaire, please provide your details. This would be greatly appreciated.

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If the questionnaire has raised any difficult issues, emotions or concerns for you, please call the FFMPU counsellor on 1800 227 772.

APPENDIX 3: HVSG CONFIDENTIALITY FORM

Homicide Victims' Support Group (Aust) Inc
 HSVG, Level 1a 239 Church Street, Parramatta NSW 2150
 Ph: 8833 8400 1800 191 777 F: 8833 8425

Confidentiality Details Form

Name: *(Mr / Mrs / Ms / Miss)*

Address:

Postcode:

Telephone: (H)

(Mob)

(W)

Name of the family member who has died:

Relationship to you

Date of death:

Date of birth:

Circumstances of death: *(Optional)*

Comments:

Are there any counselling or support programs you would like us to assist you with?

Would you like the name of your loved one to be placed on the birthday/anniversary list that is published in the newsletter?

Yes No

Would you like a support line volunteer to call you for the birthday?

Yes No

Would you like a support line volunteer to call you for the anniversary?

Yes No

Are there any topics, issues or guest speakers that you would like us to arrange to give a presentation at our monthly meeting?

Would you like your details added to the mailing list to receive the newsletter

Yes No

I am interested in volunteering some time to assist with:

1. Support of other families
2. Court support
3. Office tasks

CONFIDENTIALITY: In order to maintain our members' privacy, we ask that you do not give out telephone numbers or addresses of the other group members, speak to the media, non-members, or any other organisation, about private conversations held at our monthly support meetings, without the express permission from the group member concerned and/or the Executive Director. Any breach of confidentiality may lead to expulsion from the group. If you are unsure, please call Martha Jabour, Executive Director on (02) 8833 8400.

Signed Date.....