

June 30 2008

Submission to the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services
and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA)

Australia's Children: Safe and Well A National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children

1. Introduction

YMCA Australia welcomes this opportunity to provide our response to the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) Child Protection Discussion Paper – *Australia's Children: Safe and Well – A National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*.

We look forward to participating in the ongoing dialogue on this critical issue for children and young people, Australian families and the broader community. YMCA Australia is committed to working collaboratively towards a national strategy and unreservedly supports the national consultation process and the significant work undertaken to date that will provide the foundation of a robust national framework.

YMCA Australia has been an active partner in the 'Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia's Children' since its establishment in 2007, contributing to the development of the draft paper "*Towards a National Child Protection Strategy*". In making this submission we would like to highlight our ongoing commitment to the work of the Coalition and acknowledge the collective expertise of organisations and individuals that are represented.

In recognition of the breadth and depth of work undertaken already in developing the national framework, YMCA Australia would prefer to highlight a number of key issues which we believe are of critical importance, rather than provide detailed comment on all elements of the discussion paper.

2. YMCA Australia and our work with children, young people and families.

YMCA Australia is a community-based not-for-profit organisation that delivers programs and services to help build strong people, strong families and strong communities across Australia.

The YMCA operates in over 500 locations across Australia and during 2007 an estimated 2.2 million Australians accessed a YMCA facility or service. We employ over 7,500 staff and work with more than 3,000 volunteers.



Our support for children and families involves a range of not-for-profit programs and services that includes, but is not limited to:

- Long Day Care
- Occasional Care
- In Home Care
- Family Day Care
- Extended Hours Care
- Creche and Preschool
- Before School and After School Care Programs
- Vacation Care and Holiday Programs
- Family Camps
- Parentlink – support and assistance for single-parent families
- Young Parent Support Programs

Across our broad range of other service areas, the YMCA also places great emphasis on integrated, family-focused programs that support children, parents and families in optimizing health and wellness, personal capacity building and social inclusion.

In 2007:

- there were 2,258,670 visits to a Y Children's Service;
- 28% of all visits to a YMCA were by children (0-12);
- the YMCA provided care for 427 children with special needs each week;
- the YMCA offered 25,398 daily Childcare/OSHC places;
- 91% of YMCA Associations managed a Children's Service;
- the YMCA provided generalist and specialist services and programs to over 83,000 persons with disabilities and/or special needs; and
- 127 YMCA sites delivered a range of programs and services accessed by people living with disability.

As a national non-profit organisation that employs a large number of people and provides an extensive range of services to children and families, the issue of child protection is one of critical importance to the YMCA, our staff, volunteers, clients and the communities we support.

3. Critical Issues

3.1 Uniformity of legislation

In addition to expressing our support for a national framework, YMCA Australia would like to highlight the importance of working towards a national uniformity of child protection legislation and national consistency of related regulatory measures. The national harmonisation of child protection legislation would provide a solid basis from which organisations, community groups and agencies across all jurisdictions can ensure the application of nationally recognised and consistent standards.

3.2 National Standards

Similarly, YMCA Australia strongly recommends the development and implementation of national standards that will apply across all jurisdictions and all sectors, not just those that are currently subject to existing regulation. Nationally consistent standards that would apply in relation to employment (police checks), reporting mechanisms, community and government agency response and referral will be a highly significant component of a robust and effective national framework. It will be critical for a system of national standards to apply to *all* agencies, community organisations and groups that work with younger and older children in any capacity including education, employment, sporting and recreation.

3.3 National Public Awareness Campaign

YMCA Australia also believes that the development of a National Public Awareness Campaign will play a vital role in raising awareness about relevant changes and enhancements to legislation and regulation to protect children, in addition to supporting the broader objectives and application of the national framework. It will be essential, however, that this education and awareness raising campaign not only be conducted through the child welfare sector, but be effectively targeted to the general public and all organisations or community groups that may have contact with or provide services for children, young people and their families.

3.4 Focus on Prevention

As an organisation which provides a range of services and programs for children and their families, a central goal of the YMCA's work is to ensure the wellbeing of children with a particular focus on proactive and preventative strategies. Through our daily contact with children and families we recognise the critical importance of a preventative approach to social support rather than crisis management and the YMCA is wholly supportive of the priority that prevention strategies have in discussions on a national framework.

3.5 Capacity-building of Community Organisations

YMCA Australia strongly believes that a crucial component in the success of a national framework for child protection will be the capacity of community organisations, community groups, sporting groups and clubs to develop integrated and robust systems and mechanisms. It will be critical to ensure they meet and adhere to national standards and fully understand the implications of changes and enhancement to legislation which may be driven by the national framework. We strongly recommend that organisational



education and capacity-building strategies are an integral component of the national framework and must ensure that all agencies, organisations and groups working with children implement appropriate mechanisms reflecting a very clear understanding of their legal responsibilities towards the protection of children. The YMCA currently plays a significant role in working with community groups and sporting clubs at a local level to support their growth and capacity to respond and we are committed to assisting and supporting local groups in the implementation of a national framework for child protection

3.6 National Data Collection

The YMCA supports the development of a National Data Collection System and research strategies to provide governments, organisations, service providers and the community with detailed information about a range of child protection issues. We also support the development of a greater national research capacity to understand the impacts and benefits of preventative programs and strategies.

3.7 Children Living with Disability

As an organisation working with children living with disability, providing a range of support programs and services, the YMCA feels that the development and implementation of the national framework must address the protection issues of children with disability in a comprehensive and integrated way. This must also be reflected in any changes and enhancements to legislation, the development of national standards, public awareness raising, data collection and research.

3.8 Workforce Capacity and Recognition

YMCA Australia strongly believes that the national framework must actively support building the capacity of the child protection and children's services workforce. This is not only an issue of resourcing, training and support, but of increasing public recognition of the value of child protection workers and elevating the status of employment and careers in this field.

4. Conclusion

YMCA Australia is a strong supporter of the proposed National Framework for the Protection of Children and we have been heartened by the willingness of the Australian Government to engage constructively on this issue. We remain an active participant in the Coalition for Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia's Children and will continue to engage in ongoing dialogue and consultation with the non-government sector and relevant government agencies towards the implementation of a national framework.