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New service to keep First Nations families together

Aboriginal families and children in care will have improved access to culturally-safe legal and social support following the launch of a new specialist service aimed at keeping families together.

The Family Law Service for Aboriginal Communities (FamAC) is an Aboriginal-led service of Legal Aid NSW comprising of lawyers and allied professionals, who can assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children in family law and care & protection matters.

Solicitor in Charge Bianca Dufty, a Ngemba and Gamilaraay woman, said the launch, which coincides with the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Children's Day, was about self-determination and keeping children connected to kin and culture.

"We know from the Family Matters Report that Aboriginal children and families have better outcomes if we are together and are supported to make decisions about our families and our children," she said.

The Family Matters Report found Indigenous children in NSW are 10 times more likely to be placed in care, a figure that has increased 15 per cent to 9.7 entries per 1,000 children in 2020-21 compared to the year prior.¹

The FamAC, which has been officially operating since the end of 2022, is available to Aboriginal people with family law disputes or who are at risk of or involved in the care and protection system. In the past six months alone, the service has already provided advice to 266 clients.

In addition to legal representation, support and advice from specialist solicitors, FamAC provides non-legal support including access to a specialist mental health worker and support from Aboriginal Field Officers who can link Aboriginal people with housing and health supports.

FamAC Aboriginal Field Officer Susan Phillips, a proud Ngemba and Gamilaraay woman, travels thousands of kilometres across NSW doing outreach work in Aboriginal communities to ensure families get help early on, before removal is considered.

"Removal affected my family and community so it's personal for me being able to help families stay together. The aim is to not have kids removed or at least put them in kinship placements," she said.

"It's about kids knowing their culture, learning from their Elders and having that sense of belonging."

Director, Aboriginal Services, Legal Aid NSW, Kimberley Wilson said the service was focused on early intervention to help keep families together and out of the care and protection system.

"By ensuring families have early access to legal advice, we hope to reduce the number of children at risk and in the care and protection system," she said.

The service undertakes outreach to regional areas like Moree/New England, Northern Rivers, Western NSW and the Far South Coast including Moruya, Wallaja Lake and Batemans Bay to ensure that people in remote locations can access supports.

The service also offers duty lawyer services in the Specialist Indigenous Lists at Lismore, Coffs Harbour and Sydney and recently received additional funding to expand with three field officers located in Parramatta, Tamworth and Lismore.

The FamAC team on (02) 9407 2941 or email FamAC@legalaid.nsw.gov.au.

Solicitor in Charge Bianca Dufty is available for interview. Aboriginal Field Office Susan Phillips is also available for interview.

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ⁱ Figure 3 and 4, page 26, The Family Matters Report 2022.