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LEGAL ADVICE FOR FAMILIES TO KEEP KIDS AT HOME

A new way of working in child protection cases across NSW should see more families stay together, with changes to practice in care matters designed to ensure lawyers can provide early help and avoid unnecessary separation of children from their families.

Legal Aid NSW, the Aboriginal Legal Service, and the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) have entered a partnership to ensure all families, particularly Aboriginal families, involved in care matters are referred to access early legal advice.

The Legal Assistance for Families Partnership Agreement (LAFPA) will be introduced across NSW after trials in Tamworth, Newcastle and Gosford.

It comes as new laws are expected to come into effect in November that require DCJ take 'active efforts' to prevent children from being removed, and restore children to their parents or place children with family. This will include supporting families to access early independent legal advice.

Minister for Families and Communities and Minister for Disability Services The Hon Kate Washington said the agreement will help to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care.

"It's part of our commitment to support families sooner in the wake of the Family is Culture report," Ms Washington said.

"This agreement puts children first and ensures all organisations work collaboratively to keep kids staying safely at home with their families."

Legal Aid NSW CEO Monique Hitter said the agreement will see lawyers work proactively with families before children are removed.

"Early intervention is proven to reduce the number of children that need to be separated from their families and the stress of the court process," Ms Hitter said. "Through this partnership, we are optimistic that we can improve overall outcomes for children and their families."

ALS CEO Karly Warner said Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are more likely than other children to be taken from home younger, stay in the system for longer, and less likely to be returned to their families.

"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are safest and strongest when they grow up in family, community and culture. It's the responsibility of the child protection system to support families who want to do the best for their kids. It's on all of us to change this," she said.

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