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Primary Prevention Framework Discussion Paper
Community Development Division
Department of Premier and Cabinet
GPO Box 123
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Re: Primary Prevention Framework to Reduce Family Violence and Sexual Assault

The Australian Christian Lobby welcomes this opportunity to submit to the *Primary Prevention Framework Discussion Paper*.

ACL applauds the Tasmanian Government for seeking to develop a framework that would reduce family violence and sexual assault and strongly supports primary prevention activities aimed at preventing violence.

ACL commends the comments by the Minister for Community Development Cassy O'Connor MP acknowledging that:

children who are affected by family violence or sexual abuse experience significant negative impacts to their physical, psychological, emotional, social, behavioural, developmental and cognitive wellbeing.¹

It is essential to acknowledge, as Ms O'Connor has done, that

When children are adversely affected by the behaviour of their primary carers then that behaviour becomes a whole of community issue.²

Family violence which does not directly involve children nevertheless causes serious damage to children who witness it. ACL therefore commends the use of "family violence" in the Discussion Paper to acknowledge that:

children who witness family violence have their safety, psychological wellbeing or interests affected by violence directed at one of their carers and are therefore, victims in their own right.

¹ Department of Premier and Cabinet, Community Development Division, Discussion Paper: *A Primary Prevention Framework to Reduce Family Violence and Sexual Assault in Tasmania 2012-15*, p 2.

² DPC, *A Primary Prevention Framework*, p 2.

Preventing family violence is essential for a healthy society. The cost of family violence, both to the lives of the victims and economically to society, is a major social issue which cannot be ignored.

This submission addresses the questions raised in Discussion Questions 1 and 2 together. It then addresses some aspects of Discussion Question 4.

Discussion Questions 1 and 2

ACL agrees that addressing the key determinants of family violence and sexual assault should be the central priority in a primary prevention strategy.

An additional strategy should be the promotion of healthy marriages. Policy should encourage and affirm marriage and the importance of both mothers and fathers to children.

The strategies in Outcomes 1 and 2 would be complemented by examining the recommendations in Professor Parkinson's *For Kids' Sake* report.

For Kids' Sake

Professor Patrick Parkinson, a family law expert at the University of Sydney, produced a report last year into the social wellbeing of children in Australia. Titled *For Kids' Sake: Repairing the Social Environment for Australia's Children and Young People*, the report, commissioned by the ACL, makes a number of recommendations aimed at improving the wellbeing of children and young people in Australia.

The connection between domestic violence and children's poor wellbeing does not escape Professor Parkinson, who says "family conflict and family breakdown", including domestic violence, are "likely" to have been "a major factor in the deterioration in the mental health of children and young people in recent generations".³ In Chapter 7 of his report, he recommends family support programs as a way to reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect, suggesting they be funded by Community Trusts within each Local Government Area.⁴ The Chapter, entitled "A Community of Neighbours", also highlights the importance of community involvement in supporting families and, thus, reducing domestic violence.

Some of the recommendations in *For Kids' Sake* include:

- Offering programs on couple relationships to people who begin living together and preparing for marriage. These programs should discuss the benefits of the commitments of marriage, address issues that arise for blended and stepfamilies, and include information about domestic violence.⁵
- Parent-child relationship programs which should "address the importance of a healthy relationship between the parents for the wellbeing of children".⁶
- Parent-child relationship programs, which involve both mothers and fathers, for different stages of parenthood, including preparing for childhood, starting primary school, and starting high school. Programs should also be designed to specifically support single parents, stepfamilies, and non-resident parents.⁷

³ Professor Patrick Parkinson, *For Kids' Sake: Repairing the Social Environment for Australia's Children and Young People*, <http://www.acl.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/FKS-ResearchReport11.pdf>, Recommendation 2, p 88.

⁴ Parkinson, *For Kids' Sake*, p 12.

⁵ Parkinson, *For Kids' Sake*, Recommendation 2, p 1.

⁶ Parkinson, *For Kids' Sake*, Recommendation 4, p 1.

⁷ Parkinson, *For Kids' Sake*, Recommendation 5, p 1.

Although Parkinson’s report focuses mainly on children, ACL believes that the best approach to improving the wellbeing of children will necessarily overlap with many aspects of an approach to reducing domestic violence and sexual assault. Healthy family relationships are at the core of all these issues, and, as *For Kids’ Sake* highlights, healthy marriages are foundational to healthy families. As identified in the Discussion Paper, “a lack of positive parenting and strong positive role models are also risk factors” for intimate partner violence, highlighting the long-term influence a marriage can have on the lives of the children of that marriage.⁸

The importance of strong marriages as the basis of healthy families and societies has been confirmed in research. For example, in the USA, the *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect Report to Congress* (NIS-4) finds that marriage is a significant factor in the incidence of child abuse and neglect. Specifically, children in families headed by their married, biological parents have significantly lower rates of abuse and neglect than any other family structure. As the report finds, “children living with their married biological parents universally had the lowest rates”.⁹

By comparison, the NIS-4 found that children whose single parents had a live-in partner had “8 times the rate of maltreatment overall, over 10 times the rate of abuse, and nearly 8 times the rate of neglect” compared with children living with both their married biological parents.¹⁰

A positive nurturing home environment also provides children with the best chance of becoming confident and resilient adults and any program that supports parents will have multiple benefits for society. Thus, ACL supports the Discussion Paper’s proposal of:

*parenting programs aimed at preventing social, emotional and behavioural problems in children, the prevention of child abuse, and to strengthen parenting skills and parental confidence*¹¹

Furthermore, the immediately following proposal – “positive relationship education for partners”¹² – is an essential element of an overall strategy.

Parkinson’s recommendations recognise the need for policy which encourages community support for building healthy families. Similar to Parkinson’s recommendations, the Discussion Paper recommends a “whole-of-community approach” to “support individuals to build respectful relationships”, as part of the development of a “coordinated primary prevention strategy”.¹³ ACL supports this approach.

Question 4

While an overarching governance structure is a useful start, ACL believes strong partnerships between government and non-government services would be of benefit firstly to the service providers and secondly to the whole community.

Bravehearts

⁸ DPC, *A Primary Prevention Framework*, p 14.

⁹ US Department of Health and Human Services, *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4)*, Report to Congress, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse_neglect/natl_incid/reports/natl_incid/nis4_report_congress_full_pdf_jan2010.pdf, p 12. See Figure 5-1, 5-2, and 5-3 on pp 5-20 to 5-24.

¹⁰ US Department of Health and Human Services, *NIS-4*, p 12.

¹¹ DPC, *A Primary Prevention Framework*, p 24.

¹² DPC, *A Primary Prevention Framework*, p 24.

¹³ DPC, *A Primary Prevention Framework*, p 20.

Bravehearts is an organisation dedicated to addressing child sexual assault through raising awareness, providing healing and support, and implementing prevention and protection strategies.¹⁴ ACL recommends that the Tasmanian Government consider promoting, funding, and partnering with Bravehearts and similar organisations as a key element of its community-based approach to tackling sexual assault.

Summary

The Tasmanian Government is to be commended for addressing the issues of domestic violence and sexual assault.

ACL urges the Government to consider the central importance of marriage, and to include policy which encourages healthy marriages as foundational to healthy family relationships, which, in turn, will reduce domestic violence and sexual assault. Thus, essential to any prevention strategy is support for healthy families and the prevention of family breakdown.

ACL urges the Government to consider Professor Parkinson's *For Kids' Sake* report. Though it addresses the wellbeing of children, and not domestic violence or sexual assault in particular, these latter issues cannot be considered in isolation to the issues raised by Parkinson's report. The *For Kids' Sake* recommendations, if implemented, would play a significant role in reducing domestic violence and sexual assault.

Thank you for your consideration of our submission.

Yours faithfully



Mark Brown

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Australian Christian Lobby

¹⁴ Bravehearts, Inc, 'About Us', <http://www.bravehearts.org.au/about.ews>.