

**Submission
No 12**

**IMPROVING ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT
CHECKS**

Organisation: Tresillian
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Tresillian Family Care Centre

Submission to:
The Legislative Assembly Committee
on Community Services



Tresillian[®]

It's in our nature to nurture



FEBRUARY 2024



TRESILLIAN FAMILY CARE CENTRES

Ensuring children get the best start - improving access to early childhood health and development checks.

February 2024

Tresillian would like to thank The Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services for the opportunity to respond to the inquiry *“improving access to early childhood health and development checks”*, and to platform the work of Tresillian for children and families across NSW.

The response is made on behalf of The Royal Society for the Welfare of Mothers and Babies also known as Tresillian Family Care Centres.

Tresillian is a public health organisation operating under an Act of NSW Parliament, which is positioned in a strategic area to influence long term health outcomes. Tresillian’s brand is known as a national and NSW centre of excellence, operating within a larger health and welfare service context.

Tresillian is very well positioned to address critical state and national policy goals – in particular, early intervention and prevention services to support healthy attachment relationships, provide tailored family support for optimal development in early childhood and the delivery of “wrap around” parenting support to those families indicating early difficulties to prevent problems from occurring or escalating to the need for protective action.

Tresillian’s objectives, first and foremost are about children and their best interests with a focus on matters of child and family health, early parenting, perinatal mental health, health promotion and early intervention and prevention.

Tresillian’s guiding principle is to deliver the highest quality service to children and families and to provide children with their right to safety, stability and healthy development. Tresillian provides a strong framework that ensures the quality of service and care are provided to children and families of NSW, Victoria and the ACT.

Our guiding principles focus on available research, literature, and Tresillian best practice which will continually inform our best service and strength based approach when supporting families.

Sincerely,



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INTRODUCTION

Tresillian's submission will comment on issues relating to ***“improving access to early childhood health and development”*** within the scope of the inquiry's terms of reference.

For a number of reasons many families, including vulnerable and marginalised families often find accessing and making good use of services difficult. It is the responsibility of service providers to find ways of engaging the families and providing them with services that are easy to access and address their needs.

To see real and lasting change, the principle of collective responsibility for supporting NSW families must be realised. When diverse stakeholders learn and solve problems collaboratively they can foster more effective actions and better outcomes for children and families than they could otherwise accomplish when working independently.

Tresillian works with NSW Health, other government and non-government organisations to minimise inequities of access to care that are often encountered by vulnerable families. Tresillian's residential facilities and family care centres, established in strategic locations across NSW, the ACT and Victoria operate on a hub-and-spoke model to maximise the number of communities we can support with our services which are centred exclusively on families with young children experiencing early parenting issues; many of whom are living with complex issues.

Tresillian understands that ***“one size” does not fit all*** and our holistic and tailored services provide individualised support services for families including at risk families. Tresillian provides centre based services (residential and day services), home based services, allied health support, group programs and specialist services for families with vulnerabilities including mental health issues, alcohol and other drug issues.

At Tresillian, our goal is to ensure that all expectant families and those with babies and young children, regardless of where they live, have access to parenting advice, mental health support and parenting services, enabling them to raise healthy families and build healthy, resilient communities.

Tresillian's workforce is integral to the provision of primary, secondary and tertiary care to babies, young children and families and provide holistic care in a vast range of settings. Tresillian's nursing and allied health staff are in a strong position to identify developmental issues in children and to make timely referrals to other health and support services if required.

This responsiveness to families' changing needs, particularly those experiencing challenges in the crucial early years with their children, works to address the social determinants of health and wellbeing.

Tresillian operates twenty one (21) sites in NSW providing state-wide, regional and local support services. Tresillian provides effective and inclusive services that are user friendly with referral pathways that are flexible, accessible and culturally safe for families including families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD).

Tresillian think seriously about prevention, early intervention, health education and health promotion as essential service activities that reduce risks and we work with families to set goals towards building on the families' strengths, health and wellbeing.

1. Changes needed to address gaps in outcomes for vulnerable children, including those in rural and remote communities, Aboriginal communities, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Addressing gaps in outcomes for vulnerable children, particularly those in rural and remote communities, Aboriginal communities, and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, requires a comprehensive and tailored approach.

Research shows that of the Australian child population, 10-20% are vulnerable to adverse health, developmental and wellbeing outcomes. Vulnerable infants are at a greater risk of becoming vulnerable children, adolescents and adults over their life course.

Families with the greatest need are often the least likely to access or receive support, and have lower utilisation of preventative health services despite evidence that support in the first few years of life can significantly improve long-term outcomes.

Health and community services play a vital role in the early identification and effective response to all children including vulnerable children. Services including hospitals, community health services, alcohol and drug services, mental health and community service agencies can identify and respond to vulnerability by embedding organisational governance, systems and structures focussed on vulnerable children and families, reflecting a shared responsibility across the service system for protecting and promoting the health, safety and wellbeing of children.

Identification of vulnerability risk allows prioritisation of services to those with the greatest need. Identifying vulnerability risk within child and family health services allows those families at risk of future adverse health, developmental and wellbeing outcomes to be prioritised to receive health services and supports.

A shared understanding between practitioners who work with children and families in child health services, mental health services and early childhood centres is key to the identification of the *“under-represented”, “invisible” or “overlooked” families*.

Supporting practitioners to use their knowledge and experience, including the relationships built with families, to highlight current and potential vulnerable situations, can foster a more comprehensive understanding and consensus on what is required to better support and build scaffolds for families.

This includes the risk factors for each child and their family in relation to the specific operational/service context and the promotion of ongoing, consistent identification of areas where additional support is required to foster positive outcomes for children and families.

There is robust evidence that early intervention and prevention by child and family health nurses' who provide care that is responsive and flexible to family's needs promotes infant health, child development, healthy growth and positive parenting outcomes. There are beneficial effects in prevention of childhood injury, reduction of family entries into the child protection system, improvement in child behaviour and cognitive development and immunisation rates; improvement in parenting capacity and the management of anxiety and postnatal depression.

Australian studies report that families that have access to early intervention and prevention support show improved parent to infant attachment, improved parent to child interaction, and reduction in smoking, improved educational enrolment, creation of safe environments for infants and children and stronger relationships within families and communities.

Tresillian is responsive to the changing needs of families, particularly those experiencing challenges in the crucial early years of their child's development to address the social determinants of health and wellbeing. Tresillian operates from twenty (20) sites in New South Wales and one (1) in ACT, providing both state-wide, regional and local support services.

Tresillian knows that **“one size” does not fit all** and there is a solid case for different and individual support for families across NSW. Our tailored **“bringing services to communities in need and supporting families where they live”** concept will contribute to supporting vulnerable families safely and will give families an opportunity to build parenting capacity to provide sensitive nurturing care in an environment which children can thrive, with the goal of giving the best chance possible for children and families to avoid the risk of escalating into more complex circumstance.

One of the key challenges families face in communities (CALD, Aboriginal and rural and remote) is connecting with and staying connected to the right supports.

The Tresillian Integrated Child and Family Wellbeing Hub in Grafton address's this challenge by providing a one-stop shop – a 'no wrong door' policy ensuring that families are able to access the co-designed hub through:

Soft entry pathways, such as playgroups, classes and drop in activities that build families' skills and resilience. These activities can also function as pathways into targeted services including self-referral if required by supporting the development of trusting relationships and/or engaging families before issues arise.

Targeted services - Develop coordinated, whole of system processes and responses to support children and families. These services may be delivered from The Grafton Hub or may be external. Importantly, an objective for The Grafton Hub is facilitating warm and timely referrals so families can access the support they need at the right time before they hit 'crisis point' and formally seek assistance.

Culturally safe environments and care: The Grafton Hub has recognition of cultural diversity with spaces that respect and celebrate the cultural backgrounds of the families served and that meets the needs of Aboriginal children and their families & acknowledges the ongoing impact of intergenerational trauma. The addition of an Aboriginal Health Worker will facilitate local connections to Aboriginal families at The Grafton Hub & in their homes and community. They will also connect and partner with the Aboriginal Controlled Health Organisations.

Community outreach activities and co-location with services that meet essential needs (health, food, shelter, financial), that engage families who may not naturally visit the hub or those who are described as 'hard-to-reach'.

The Tresillian Hub model provides an integrated seamless service response for families in the early parenting period, we provide a framework for the effective delivery of flexible services utilising a range of modes of delivery and packages of care tailored to the unique needs of families and communities. The Hub will provide a soft entry for parents accessing early parenting support with seamless stigma free integration of health, wellbeing and perinatal mental health counselling under the one roof in a safe, trusted, family friendly environment which is appropriate to the level of need and complexity.

Our Grafton Hub takes a holistic approach to health, addressing not only medical needs but also social determinants of health. This comprehensive perspective helps create a healthier community by recognizing and addressing the interconnected factors influencing well-being.

The Tresillian Grafton Hub is a centre of excellence well-equipped with specialized healthcare professionals including Nurses with Child and Family Health, a Social Worker and Aboriginal Health Worker, research and a range of support services through partnerships.

Most importantly - Tresillian make all attempts to ensure that communities and families:

- **know where to go for help and are able to access the right supports at the right time, in a trauma-informed, culturally safe environment.**
- **stay connected and have access to holistic, sustained care.**
- **have support to address the social and cultural determinants of health, while building social and cultural connections.**

Addressing gaps in outcomes for vulnerable children requires a collaborative and culturally sensitive approach that recognizes and respects the diversity of communities. Ongoing collaboration with community members and stakeholders is essential to develop sustainable solutions that promote the well-being of all children, regardless of their background or location.

The Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services can take this opportunity to advocate for policies that address the specific needs of vulnerable children in diverse communities, to allocate funding and resources strategically to ensure that programs and services reach those who need them the most.

2. Barriers that affect parents' access to routine health and development checks that track their child's progress against developmental milestones.

Several barriers can affect parents' access to routine health and development checks for their children. These barriers may vary depending on factors such as socioeconomic status, geographic location, cultural background, and individual circumstances. Here are some common barriers:

Limited Awareness: Lack of awareness about the importance of routine health and development checks may result in parents not seeking or prioritizing these services. Insufficient information about the availability of such services or where to access them can contribute to low awareness.

Financial Constraints: Cost can be a significant barrier, especially in communities with limited financial resources. Parents may avoid or delay health checks due to concerns about out-of-pocket expenses, transportation costs, or the cost of missed work hours.

Transportation Challenges - Tyranny of Distance: Limited access to reliable transportation can hinder parents' ability to take their children to health and development check appointments.

In rural or remote areas, the tyranny of distance and the lack of public transportation options can make it especially challenging for families to reach healthcare facilities.

Work and Time Constraints: Demands of work schedules and other commitments may make it difficult for parents to find the time to schedule and attend routine health check appointments. Limited flexibility in work hours or the fear of losing wages may discourage parents from taking time off for these appointments.

Language and Cultural Barriers: Language differences and cultural disparities can impede effective communication between healthcare providers and parents, affecting the understanding of the importance of routine checks and the ability to follow through with them.

Stigma and Mistrust: Cultural or societal stigma associated with seeking healthcare, especially for preventive or routine reasons, may deter parents from accessing health services. Mistrust of healthcare providers or the healthcare system can also contribute to hesitancy in seeking routine check-ups.

Limited Access to Healthcare Providers: In some areas, there may be a shortage of healthcare professionals or facilities, making it challenging for parents to access timely and convenient appointments. Long wait times for appointments can be a deterrent, as parents may find it difficult to navigate a system with delays.

Inadequate Communication: Poor communication from healthcare providers about the importance of routine checks, the schedule for developmental milestones, and how parents can actively engage in their child's health and development can be a barrier.

Cultural Competence of Healthcare Providers: The cultural competence of healthcare providers may impact the effectiveness of communication and the overall experience for parents from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Limited Childcare Support: Parents may face difficulties in arranging childcare during the time of health and development checks, particularly if they have multiple children or face challenges finding reliable childcare options.

Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach, involving healthcare providers, community organizations, policymakers, and parents themselves.

Strategies may include community outreach and education, financial assistance programs, improved access to transportation, cultural competency training for healthcare professionals, and efforts to reduce stigma associated with seeking routine healthcare.

Tresillian has a suite of services to offer families where Tresillian child and family health nurses, Allied Health Workers and Aboriginal Health Workers play a key role in the provision of community based child and family health service. Access to specialist services and support close to home has been shown to reduce the distress experienced by parents experiencing difficulties in the early years of their child's life, while improving health outcomes for the child and their parents.

The Tresillian 2U mobile early parenting service operates from a purpose-designed van providing a non-stigmatised, trusted environment for parents in familiar locations within their own community, enhancing their participation and control of the interaction with support staff. The service provides a high quality, accessible and flexible program that supports families to manage stressors and improve parent-child attachment during the pivotal time from birth to age five years.

The van is staffed by a team of child and family health nurses and an Aboriginal health worker and has a consultation space for parents to meet with clinicians. This space enables parents' access to routine health and development checks for their children, comprehensive assessment of early parenting concerns, challenges and factors impacting on family functioning and parent-child relationships. The van includes a section for infant/child physical assessment and a cot for coaching of safe sleep and settling strategies.

The van is fitted with information technology and communication equipment, including internet access, to enable connectivity across multiple locations. A smart TV enables use of visual aids such as clips from trusted web sources (including the Tresillian YouTube channel). Telehealth capability is available through a web-based videoconferencing platform, allowing partners or other carers of the child to participate in the consultation if they are unable to attend at the van location (i.e. in rural areas many partners are unable to leave their farm due to the drought and requirements to hand feed their stock). Inclusiveness of key carers of the child benefits all family members and facilitates open conversations and support to enhance relationships and family functioning.

The vehicle is fitted with a generator, enabling utilisation of full functionality regardless of location. This has been integral to providing the flexibility to bring the service to a broad range of community

locations including co-location with frequently visited services trusted by local parents, e.g. pre-schools, neighbourhood centres, local council locations and community events.

The van locations are authorised through Memoranda of Understanding with other local services. This includes partnerships with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and other health and community service providers in the local area, within the facilities where the van is parked. There is a strong focus on engagement with Aboriginal families and communities ***with over 23% of families accessing this service identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.***

Importantly, the model includes a predictable and reliable rotation of locations to build community trust in the service and a knowledge that the service will be available in particular locations on certain days of the week. The communication of this location schedule has been one of the key factors to building inter-professional relationships, community trust and integrating the services into the local service system network. The flexibility of the van by its very nature of being a mobile service, means the service can respond to community requests to be present at particular community events attended by families.

3. Recruitment and retention of health professionals to address workforce shortages.

The recruitment and retention of health professionals require robust strategies to address workforce shortages and to ensure the availability of quality healthcare services. Several effective measures can be implemented to attract and keep healthcare professionals in underserved areas or areas experiencing shortages.

A comprehensive approach that combines recruitment and retention strategies, along with a focus on creating supportive and attractive working environments, is essential for addressing healthcare workforce shortages and ensuring sustained access to quality healthcare services.

Tresillian is committed to fostering a diverse, skilled, and motivated healthcare workforce capable of delivering high-quality care to children and families.

By addressing the unique challenges of recruitment and retention in these areas, we aim to improve health outcomes, reduce disparities, and build healthier, more resilient communities.

Tresillian uses the following strategies to inspire recruitment and retention:

Targeted Marketing and Outreach: The Tresillian Marketing Team develop and Implement targeted marketing campaigns and outreach programs to promote opportunities in underserved areas, emphasizing the unique benefits of practicing in rural and remote communities.

Collaboration with Educational Institutions: Tresillian Partners with Universities, nursing programs, and other healthcare education institutions to develop training programs that emphasize the needs of underserved communities.

Telehealth Opportunities: Tresillian provides opportunities for healthcare professionals to engage in telehealth services, allowing them to reach clients in remote or underserved areas without the need for physical relocation.

Community Engagement: Involve local communities in recruitment efforts by showcasing the positive impact healthcare professionals can have on community health and well-being.

Professional Development Opportunities: Tresillian offers ongoing professional development, training, and educational opportunities to help our healthcare professionals advance in their careers and stay engaged.

Work-Life Balance: We promote work-life balance by implementing flexible scheduling, part-time options, and supportive policies that accommodate the diverse needs of healthcare professionals and their families.

Mentorship Programs: Tresillian has established mentorship programs that pair experienced healthcare professionals with newer recruits, fostering a sense of professional growth.

Quality Working Environment: Tresillian Create a positive and supportive working environment by addressing workplace stressors, providing adequate resources, and promoting a culture of collaboration and respect.

Recognition and Appreciation: Recognize and appreciate the efforts of our healthcare professionals through regular feedback, awards, and acknowledgment of their contributions to the workplace and community.

Continuous Feedback Mechanisms: Establish mechanisms for healthcare professionals to provide feedback on working conditions, allowing for continuous improvement and addressing concerns promptly.

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs): Tresillian offer staff an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) designed to provide confidential support, resources, and counselling services to employees facing personal or work-related challenges that may impact their well-being and performance.

4. Funding for early intervention programs and screening to ensure children are given support for developmental issues, including telehealth and other models.

Identifying and addressing developmental delays early can prevent potential long-term challenges for children and their family. Early intervention can mitigate the impact of developmental delays on a child's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development.

Securing funding for early intervention programs and screening initiatives, including the integration of telehealth and other innovative models, is crucial for ensuring that children receive timely support for developmental issues.

Navigating the landscape of competitive government and philanthropic funding submissions demands a combination of creativity, expertise, and attention to detail to secure the resources needed to advance important initiatives and make a meaningful difference for early intervention programs and screening.

Government budgets are finite, and funding for various programs and initiatives must compete for a share of these limited resources. This scarcity of funds creates a competitive environment where different sectors and priorities vie for funding allocation.

There is often high demand for government funding across various sectors, including education, healthcare, infrastructure, social services, and research.

Tresillian considers and develops well-researched and compelling government proposals for early intervention programs that requires careful planning, thorough research, clear communication, and a focus on outcomes.

Funding allows organizations like Tresillian to allocate resources toward achieving their goals and objectives. Adequate funding ensures that essential resources are available to support initiatives effectively. Adequate funding is essential for organizations like Tresillian to deliver high-quality programs and services that have a meaningful impact on their target populations.

It allows for the implementation of evidence-based practices, staff training, program evaluation, and ongoing quality improvement efforts, ultimately enhancing effectiveness and outcomes.

Virtual Residential Parenting Services (VRPS)

Tresillian ensures that technology-based solutions, including telehealth, are accessible to all families.

The VRPS is an intensive 5-day virtual child and family health service for families with 0–3-year-old children where there are issues associated with child sleep/settling, feeding, routines, behaviour, or where there are challenges associated with the adjustment to parenting or parental anxiety or depression. The service aims to increase access to intensive parenting supports including for people in rural and regional areas, and increase opportunities to engage fathers/co-parents, extended family.

The program address the issues for families who face barriers to accessing face-to-face services (e.g. due to geographical and socioeconomic background). The families are offered support from a multidisciplinary team of health nurses, psychologists, social workers, paediatricians, and psychiatrists, working in partnership with families to increase parent confidence and provide guidance to resolve concerns.

The VRPS aligns strongly with the NSW First 2000 Days Framework which asserts the critical importance of the first 2000 days of child's life for their ongoing physical, cognitive, social, and emotional health. By providing parenting supports in the earliest years of a child's life, the VRPS is positioned as an important component of NSW's response to reducing the impact of early childhood adversity.

5. Any other related matters

A holistic and multidimensional approach that considers the following related matters can contribute to the success of early intervention programs, ensuring that children receive the support they need for optimal development and well-being.

These factors can complement efforts to secure funding and improve the overall effectiveness of initiatives:

- Parental Education and Engagement
- Community-Based Services
- Health Equity and Access
- Cross-Sector Collaboration
- Long-Term Follow-Up and Support
- Integration with Existing Systems
- Research and Data Analysis
- Professional Training and Development
- Policy Advocacy for Systemic Change
- Preventive Health Measures

CONCLUSION

Early year's investment is not a magic bullet. There is no single programme or approach that can deliver the improved outcomes we seek. Instead, it will take a concerted and long-term effort across a range of policies and services to achieve a transformation in outcomes. The scale of the changes which will be required to bring about these improvements is a challenge. Service planners and providers may have to take difficult decisions, for example in respect of resource allocation, to shift the focus from crisis management to prevention, early identification and early intervention, whilst realistically recognising that crisis management will still be needed.

There is life beyond early years and some children and families will need long-term support throughout childhood and beyond. We can, however, hope to reduce the numbers of such families through supporting the capacity of children and parents to secure positive outcomes for themselves to the point where it can be self-sustaining within the universal services that are available and by building community capacity so that the wider community is empowered to provide a supportive environment for children and families

In the trenches of clinical practice, we've observed a consistent limitation in early intervention services, regardless of the programs available. Yet, leveraging the commendable efforts of numerous NSW agencies, there's potential for significant improvement in outcomes for children and families. This forward momentum holds promise in alleviating demand pressures across the entire spectrum of child and family services.



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Acknowledgement of Country

Tresillian acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the First Peoples of Australia. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of land on the countries on which we live and work and their unique spiritual relationships to the lands and seas. We pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, past and present, and acknowledge all the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in the communities we serve.