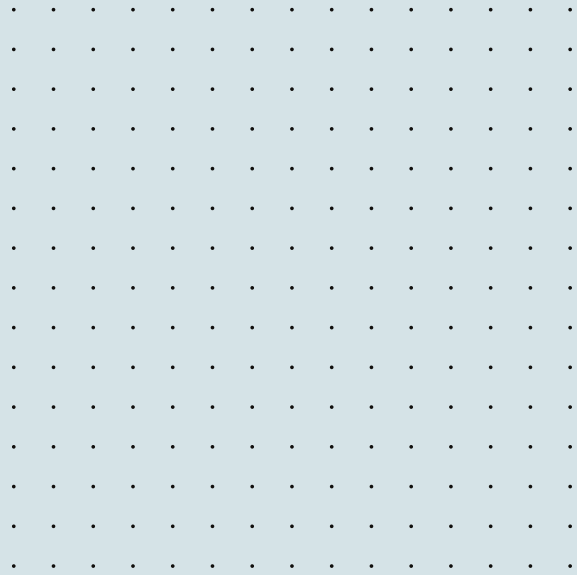**Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights**

Equality without Exception

Review of Children, Youth and Parenting Programs

Submission to the Australian Government Department of Social Services

Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights

February 2025

About us

This submission has been developed by the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR). AMWCHR is an organisation of Muslim women leading change to advance the rights and status of Muslim women in Australia. We bring over 30 years of experience in providing one-to-one support to Muslim women, young women and children, developing and delivering community education and capacity-building programs to raise awareness and shift prevailing attitudes. We also work as advocates -researching, publishing, informing policy decisions and reform initiatives as well as offering training and consultation to increase sector capacity to recognise and respond to the needs of Muslim women, young women and children.

As one of the leading voices for Muslim women's rights in Australia, we challenge the most immediate and pertinent issues Muslim women face every day. We promote Muslim women's right to self-determination, recognising the inherent agency that already exists, bringing issues of inequality and disadvantage to light. AMWCHR works with individuals, the community, partner organisations and government to advocate for equality within the Australian context. This submission is designed to contribute greater awareness and understanding of the unique challenges and barriers facing Muslim parents in Australia – including newly arrived families - and their specialised support needs throughout their complex and varied parenting journeys.

Acknowledgement of Country

This submission recognises that gender, race, and religion intersect to create multiple forms of discrimination and violence against Muslim women, particularly in a context of growing Islamophobia. It also recognises that preventing prejudice in all forms is bound to the struggles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Before we can successfully tackle issues within our communities, we must address the ongoing impacts of colonisation, systemic racism, and discrimination in all its forms in this country.

AMWCHR acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands our organisation is located on and where we conduct our work. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past and present. AMWCHR is committed to honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters, and seas and their rich contribution to Society.

Executive Summary

The Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR) welcomes this opportunity to provide feedback to the Department of Social Services' Review of Children, Youth and Parenting Programs. AMWCHR has been delivering the Children and Parenting Support (CaPS) program since 2006 from its founding title as the Cornerstone project to its reiteration under CaPS and underpinned by the Early Years Strategy of 2024-2034. During this period, AMWCHR has engaged thousands of Muslim parents; working to strengthen and build our communities' understanding, appreciation, knowledge, and skills to parent their children and support their development in the Australian context.

It is from this extensive experience, in addition to results from consultations with AMWCHR team members delivering our CaPS programs, that we have formulated the recommendations within this submission. As we are a CaPS provider, this submission aims to provide insights and recommendations for how to strengthen the CaPS element of the Department's wider children, youth, and parenting programs. Further, this submission is focussed on contexts, experiences, and recommendations relevant to Muslim parents, children, and families, some of which may also be relevant to wider migrant and refugee communities. This submission will therefore first set out the context surrounding our program delivery, where we have seen success in our model, and where we believe the model and the broader program can be strengthened to improve outcomes for Muslim families, including or in addition to migrant and refugee families.

AMWCHR's parenting programs have been delivered to diverse Muslim communities across Melbourne for almost two decades. The key to our programs' success is our sensitivity in weaving key parenting essentials and the Australian system into participants' cultural worldview. Our audiences have represented diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, and often – though not always - share experiences of being newly arrived migrants or refugees. These are community members who are frequently isolated and are struggling to navigate their way through Australia's complex systems, services, and socio-cultural environments. Our programs support these community members in reflecting on their personal, cultural, and community norms with regards to parenting and the new or different expectations they face in an Australian context. We encourage the women who attend our programs to harness their existing strengths as parents, and identify areas they would like to see growth to support their children's social, cognitive, and identity development as Australians.

As an outcome, we have seen Muslim parents develop confidence to seek services and support, advocate for their children's needs within kinder and school systems, challenge cultural expectations in parenting, apply positive parenting strategies in accordance with their child's developmental years, and support a more gender equal parenting approach that recognises the unique strengths, capacities, and talents of their children. Reported outcomes have indicated children being more engaged with parents, more open to sharing their successes and concerns, and more responsive to efforts by parents to sustain a positive parent-child relationship. We have also seen parents who have attended our programs becoming more proactive, joining parent volunteer groups in schools and deepening engagement and communication with their children's schoolteachers. These positive changes ultimately support improved developmental outcomes for their children.

Despite these successes within our CaPS programs, we are also always identifying opportunities for improvement, especially as new needs are identified by our program participants and the context in which we practice changes. In the coming years, realising these improvements and changes should be a focus for the Department and all CaPS programs servicing Muslim parents and families in order to achieve objectives outlined in the national Early Years Strategy.

Based on consultations with AMWCHR's Programs Team, our history of successful delivery of CaPS programs, and direct feedback and outcomes from community members attending our programs, **AMWCHR makes the following recommendations to the Department's Review:**

<u>Recommendation 1:</u> That the Department increases funding allocations to ethno-specific organisations delivering CaPS programs to be directed towards:

      a)   increased resourcing to ensure organisations are able to engage and work meaningfully with community groups who have additional barriers to participation;

      b)   ensuring programs can adopt a holistic approach by facilitating parental access to wrap-around support; and

      c)   facilitating transport options for families experiencing practical barriers to engagement.

<u>Recommendation 2:</u> That the Department provide opportunities and directives to achieve:

a) upskilling of bi-cultural workers to increase cultural representation within programs; and

b) capacity building training for facilitators working interculturally, with key focus on

    i. structural and interpersonal discrimination, racism, and Islamophobia;

    ii. cultural contexts and considerations;

    iii. intersectionality; and

    iv. anti-racist and strengths-based practices.

Recommendation 3: That the administrative requirements of CaPS are amended to be more flexible for funded agencies to deliver best practice models and to respond organically to community need.

Recommendation 4: That the Department encourages and funds organisations to develop CaPS programs focussed on parenting of older children and parenting across age ranges to fill a crucial support gap.

Background and context surrounding parents' engagement in our CaPS programs

The experiences and challenges faced by Muslim families in Australia are shaped and impacted by the broader social, cultural, and political climates. These contexts always factor into the way that AMWCHR works with and supports our clients, especially when it comes to issues of Islamophobia, racism, gendered expectations, and the intersections of these experiences. Over the past year of our CaPS program delivery, there have been several key issues that have gained prominence with our program – both in terms of recruitment and engagement of program participants, as well as the concerns and challenges that parents within the program are facing in their own lives. Below are several areas that shape our work and the way we engage with Muslim families within our CaPS programs.

Parenting in a cross-cultural environment

As is always the case across our service provision, AMWCHR takes a gendered lens to our work – recognising that Muslim women face a complex set of expectations and barriers from both within and outside of their cultural communities. Parenting is one of the primary ways in which culture is practised and transmitted, and the vast majority of cultures hold women as receptacles of community values and traditions. The expectations of, and from, Muslim women as mothers are therefore exceptionally high.

Parenting in a cross-cultural environment places significant challenges and sometimes barriers to the wellbeing of women and positive parenting relationships. Often migrant Muslim women face these challenges alone because of limited access to and awareness of parenting, health, and educational support services (AMWCHR, 2023). As an example, we have found that anecdotally, Muslim mothers are reluctant to access childcare services or playgroups for their younger children. There is, generally, a collective belief within communities that learning should be done from the home during the early years, with extended family systems being present for additional support. This way of raising children fosters strong family ties and connection to culture and language from an early age. However the normative expectation - as is the case across Australian society broadly - is that mothers will stay home to take on the responsibility to tend to children and support their development during these formative years (Al-deen & Windle, 2015). While many women step into this role willingly and happily, it does place pressure on mothers as transmitters of cultural values, and without adequate family, social, and community supports, can leave mothers isolated. These are all experiences we have come across within our programs.

Generally within our programs, mothers share that their younger children are more receptive to taking part in and adopting cultural practices and traditions, as there is less conflict with personal identities due to children spending much of their time within their cultural communities. For many mothers, challenges relating to parenting can arise or escalate as children grow older, and in particularly during the adolescent period (Renzaho et al., 2017). During adolescence, parents may find that the gap between their children's cultural identities and civic identities are more pronounced, as young people's engagement with social institutions increase (Renzaho et al., 2017). Children are at intersections between who they are within their cultural communities, and who they are within the broader Australian community. There are also differences in parenting

across genders – many mothers believe they are better able to parent girls, as they are "*more likely to listen"* and are more open to accepting cultural values than boys.

These parenting challenges often occur vis-à-vis parents' own identity negotiations; namely, how to step into motherhood amidst external expectations, norms, and pressure from within one's own cultural community as well as the dominant Australian culture. Many Muslim parents therefore require additional supports during these challenging years to manage generational tensions as well as their own sense of self and identities as individuals and mothers. For Muslim women, these cultural contexts necessitate supports from agencies that are equipped to speak to the specific challenges Muslim families face towards strengthening the parent-child relationship.

Impacts of overseas conflicts and crises

In addition to the gendered and cross-cultural challenges of parenting, another central concern that has grown within the past two years of our CaPS service delivery is the local impacts of overseas conflicts and crises. Given the highly politicised nature of Muslim identities, we have observed that participants' engagement in CaPS has been directly relational to the global political climate. Specifically, we have noted that the increase in Islamophobia/Islamophobic attacks in the wake of Israel's violence in Palestine (Islamophobia Register Australia, 2023) has hindered Muslim women's civic engagement in community programs such as CaPS. This resonates with research findings that show that anti-Muslim narratives, including from politicians and the media, can adversely affect Muslim mothers' confidence and their involvement in the community (Peucker, 2021). It has also been found, cross-culturally, that instances of Islamophobia experienced personally and collectively can lead to Muslims disengaging from civic participation (Peucker, 2021).

As such, rising Islamophobia in the current political context has contributed to the further erosion of trust in mainstream services, which are already perceived as programs for 'managing' Muslim communities (Husain & Mansouri, 2023). Our clients have expressed that they do not feel safe engaging in mainstream services as a result of current and/or pervious experiences of Islamophobia, racism, and targeting.

While the global political climate and the resulting increase in Islamophobia has had an adverse impact on community engagement in CaPS, it is also important to note its impact on parental

concerns. Staff consultations have revealed that parents' concerns and needs have shifted, and many parents are seeking advice on how to assist children to navigate experiences of Islamophobia occurring within school environments. Hence, there has been a growing need for our CaPS programs to focus on capacity building so that parents are better able to support their children to remain safe amidst high levels of racism and Islamophobia.

These experiences of discrimination have life-long impacts related to identity development, belonging, and physical and mental health (Younus & Mian, 2019; Abdi et al., 2019). Reducing racism and discrimination across Australian systems and services will therefore have a strong impact on closing demographic outcome gaps.

Practical, cultural, and linguistic barriers to engaging with programs and services

An important aspect of delivering parenting programs to Muslim communities is accounting for the many intersecting cultural, linguistic, and practical barriers that often inhibit women's participation in or awareness of programs and services. These barriers are often magnified for migrant and refugee women, especially those who are recently arrived to Australia, who have not yet developed their English language skills, and/or are unfamiliar with Australian systems.

Migration and displacement can heavily shape or determine parenting needs post-settlement. Experiences of war, conflict, and forced migration increase the risk of both short- and long-term psychosocial development and mental health in children (Jordans et al., 2014). Parents from refugee communities struggle not only with the psychological impact of their own experiences but also with a host of ongoing stressors in their country of resettlement (El-Khani et al., 2018). Fortunately, parents can play a powerful role in moderating the impact on children's development and mental health, by providing a supportive and structured home environment to deal with the feelings and uncertainty brought about by displacement (Slone & Shoshani, 2017). However, we have found that accessing the appropriate supports for parents to build parenting capacity and fulfil their children's needs is not always straightforward.

 A lack of in-language services and resources is often the first barrier that many women face. Language barriers not only impact women's ability to access programs such as those related to parenting, they also impact the parent-child relationship in and of itself. As children often learn English far more quickly than their parents (Birman, 2006), they can become interpreters and

translators for parents, and parents in turn become highly dependent on their children (Narchal & Hembrow, 2024). This places considerable pressure and responsibility on children as their parents' access to Australian services is mediated through them (Narchal & Hembrow, 2024). In other instances, young people may improve their English language skills while losing or failing to develop their parental and cultural language (Cox et al., 2021). This erosion of a shared language can make it difficult for parents and children to effectively communicate with one another, impacting relationships and potential for conflict and misunderstanding (Cox et al., 2021). These language barriers can mean that parents become increasingly isolated following settlement, as they are prevented from accessing services, supports, and their wider community (Warr et al., 2020). We have also observed that such barriers can mean that parents remain unfamiliar with cultural norms around parenting in an Australian context (AMWCHR, 2023).

Alongside linguistic barriers, we have also noted an increasing risk of isolation and disengagement tied to geographic and population shifts. Due to the low supply of affordable and accessible housing options in metropolitan Melbourne, many families – and especially newly arrived families – are being forced to settle or move away from suburban areas in pursuit of cheaper housing (Easthope et al., 2018). These areas often lack transport infrastructure, isolating communities unless they have access to private transport (Smith et al., 2021). For most people, this would usually mean a heavy reliance on cars and driving licences. However, for the migrant communities we work with, owning a car is a significant expense, and is likely to offset any savings gained from accessing affordable housing in outer suburbs (Saberi et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2021). Further, most of the women in our programs have never had a driver's licence, and learning to drive in Australia requires a considerable investment both in terms of the time required to learn as well as the cost of driving lessons. This means that transport options are limited in terms of access and affordability. These are barriers that shape Muslim mothers' day-to-day activities and engagement with their communities.

In recent times, many programs and services have made attempts to increase accessibility for their clients by moving to an online model of service. However, we have not seen success with this model due to considerations such as limited literacy, digital literacy, and other linguistic barriers (Ardakani et al., 2023). Internet connectivity in areas we service has been reported as insufficient for useful and effective online learning. In addition, most parents do not have access to personal smart phones or computers to be able to access online learning platforms. In cases where internet

connectivity, technology, and literacy are not issues, competing family commitments and childminding demands have been reported as challenges for online participation and often obstruct effective participation. Rather than opening up options for clients, we have found that over-reliance on technology can present further barriers to participation across a diverse set of programs and services. What is instead required is face-to-face models, community outreach, and more intensive support to overcome the practical, cultural, and linguistic barriers to engagement with programs and services.

Structure of our program

AMWCHR has seen marked success through our programs over the course of our operation due to our connection to and representation of the communities that we support. This allows us to speak from a place of shared culture, values, and life experiences, and connect with participants in an open, non-judgemental, and productive manner.

AMWCHR's CaPS program is delivered across Melbourne in areas with large Muslim populations, such as Dandenong, Craigieburn, and Epping. We have also delivered parenting programs in regional Victoria, where there are considerable service gaps that leave newly arrived families increasingly isolated and without supports. Our program takes a three-pronged approach, which includes:

a) a series of interactive parenting group workshops to provide information, skills and capacity building, social connectivity, and support for parents on challenging parenting concerns; and
b) individual support to mothers needing parenting advice and referrals for their unique circumstances.

Over our 30 plus years of working with and advocating for diverse Muslim communities, AMWCHR has developed a deep understanding of the issues and challenges facing Muslim women and families in Australia. We hold over 25 community consultations annually with diverse Muslim women and young women to ensure our work is designed to respond to the unique needs and challenges facing communities, and that our program structures and models are accessible and meaningful for the women we seek to support. This enables us to engage with and support diverse

Muslim communities and tackle complex topics such as parenting the child development in unique ways, with cultural and religious safety and without fear of judgement or discrimination.

There are several key practices that set the foundation for success within our CaPS programs. These are:

- Employing bi-cultural and bi-lingual workers to allow for the provision of in-language programs and workshops;
- Engaging community liaison staff who are leaders in their own communities and who are critical to establishing and maintaining relationships with community groups, especially those who are traditionally isolated from services and supports;
- Easing into content slowly and gently, focusing on developing trust and comfort in the initial stages before tackling sensitive or uncomfortable issues and topics;
- Providing space for women to speak openly about the ways in which gender, racism, trauma, migration, displacement, and other structural and individual barriers have shaped and impacted their lives;
- Utilising a strengths-based approach to facilitate connection to personal, cultural, and religious identities and values that support positive parenting practices;
- Utilising a face-to-face model to grow community connections, support systems, and deep engagement with the program content;
- Providing practical supports to encourage and maintain program attendance, such as transport options, meals, and on-site childcare;
- Providing options for more intensive, one-to-one debriefs and supports for program participants, where needed; and
- Maintaining relationships and referral pathways to other culturally-safe services for clients who require additional professional supports that fall outside of the scope of AMWCHR's service provision.

Because AMWCHR is a community organisation that utilises a grassroots approach, we are able to be flexible in our delivery – responding to the varied needs identified within each group of mothers we work with. Our work starts by supporting mothers in feeling comfortable with themselves, their identity, and their role as parents, which is the foundation upon which they can foster and strengthen their relationships with their children.

At AMWCHR we know that women in Muslim communities play a central role in managing their families' physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing. Improving mothers' parenting confidence and capacity therefore has wider and ongoing benefits for participants' families and communities as a whole, as they share learnings with partners, extended family, and other support systems to collectively contribute to children's growth and development.

Facilitating meaningful engagement and positive outcomes for families

While AMWCHR has seen considerable success in achieving positive outcomes and identified goals within our CaPS program, we have also identified areas in which the overarching program can be strengthened. Many of these proposed changes relate to the resourcing of the program, the administrative structure of the program, and the focus of the program in terms of its goals and framing.

At AMWCHR we recognise that engagement in parent education is a gradual process. CaPS programs must be adequately resourced to allow us to do the important groundwork that facilitates meaningful and longer-term engagement. For example, by developing trust and easing into program content/curriculum. The below are areas in which we believe the program can be strengthened to better engage and support Muslim parents and families, as well as families from broader migrant and refugee communities where relevant.

Resourcing of the program

A considerable challenge that AMWCHR has faced when delivering our CaPS programs has been related to under-resourcing of the program, which impacts our capacity to engage clients on the long-term basis required to achieve change in parenting behaviours. Often, AMWCHR fills this gap between the resourcing provided by the program and our actual need on the ground through contributing organisational resources in-kind or materially. However, this is an unsustainable way to operate, and places a heavy burden on our organisation as a whole.

The first area where further resourcing is required is related to additional funding to contribute to program staffing. For many Muslim communities, parenting is assumed to be an automatic inborn skill, and the idea of having to learn about parenting is often alien. Parenting education and

improving parenting skills are not intrinsic motivators. Likewise, parents often only seek help when parenting challenges have become a crisis and their children's development are beyond their control. We have therefore found that engaging communities in parenting programs requires creativity and protracted efforts on the part of our group facilitators. For some communities, it's the social element that brings them in. For more disadvantaged families, material aid support is the pathway towards participation. Once involved in the program, parents are more likely to be open to engage in the learning about parenting and child development. This process takes time and often a workshop to deliver a parenting skill requires 3-4 sessions to achieve the goal. Therefore, the resources needed to deliver effective programs to the cohort that we work with is considerable. The current funding received by organisations such as AMWCHR is not sustainable to deliver such intensive work, and the resourcing needs of our organisation are likely to differ to the resourcing needs of organisations that work with other (non-migrant) community groups. These different contexts and the intensive but necessary methods required to engage participants need to be taken into consideration by the Department when making decisions surrounding funding allocations.

The second area that we believe the CaPS program could be strengthened in terms of resourcing is related to ensuring that the program is holistic and facilitating access to the necessary wrap-around supports. Many of the families that AMWCHR supports within our CaPS programs are struggling in meeting their basic needs. This experience is reflected in wider data that shows that one quarter of Muslim children in Australia are living in poverty (Hassan, 2015), which is considerably higher than the national rate of 16.5% (Davidson et al., 2023). In this context, many of the parenting challenges the women in our programs face are directly related to their families' basic needs – food, housing, healthcare. Impediments to meeting these basic needs mean that children's wellbeing is severely impacted, but it also means that clients' capacity to maintain engaged in our programs is diminished. For example, when women are forced to continually move in order to access affordable housing, this is unstable and disruptive for their children, but it can also mean they are no longer within the catchment area for our programs. Mothers have also shared the challenges they face in accessing school uniforms, books, laptops, and other essential items that their children require for school. For families who are struggling, AMWCHR provides donated food boxes. However, these food boxes are not nearly enough to meet families' needs. Further, the administrative burden and the distribution of material aid requires resourcing. While we know that the CaPS program is not focused on providing material or financial supports to

families, there is scope and opportunity for the programs to be an entry point for families' access to other services. In our case, CaPS programs that have been able to engage more isolated parents may be able to act as a bridge to existing services and supports that can provide stop-gap measures to meet families' basic needs, as well as contribute to broader capacity building work towards financial security and independence. For clients in our programs, many of the parenting challenges that families are facing are directly linked to poverty and financial insecurity. The Early Years Strategy clearly underscores that in order to meet its objectives, all children in Australia must live in environments where all their basic needs are met. The CaPS program is an avenue through which this can be achieved, with greater resourcing and support from the Department to facilitate parental access to wrap-around support.

The other important resourcing need within the program is related to allowances to facilitate transport for participants. In recent years, due to high population growth and increasing rents, communities are living further away from suburban towns to access more affordable housing options. These areas often lack transport infrastructure to support parents attend program. Among the migrant communities we work with, many do not drive as they do not have licences or access to a car. Transport support is sometimes necessary for some families to access parenting programs and services, particularly for those with limited resources (low income, no community support for transport help). Currently the grant doesn't create provisions for transport support (e.g., Cabcharge or similar) to be provided directly to clients. This should be an essential funding provision moving forward.

Recommendation 1: That the Department increases funding allocations to ethno-specific organisations delivering CaPS programs to be directed towards:

a) Increased resourcing to ensure organisations are able to engage and work meaningfully with community groups who have additional barriers to participation;
b) Ensuring programs can adopt a holistic approach by facilitating parental access to wrap-around support;
c) Facilitating transport options for families experiencing practical barriers to engagement.

Maintaining cultural safety

Parent education is a skill that requires specialised training and work experience as it delves not only into child development essentials but also the intricacies of family and parenting dynamics, roles, styles, and culture. In working with families of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, including Muslim communities, parent educators need to also have strong understanding of working interculturally. This means integrating parenting principles that sit well within their audience's cultural worldviews and community expectations. In our experience, failure to do this often leads to rejection and disinterest by communities on the ground. Due to a history of targeting, discrimination, and misinformation, Muslim communities are often understandably fearful that programs and services will attempt to erode their cultural and religious identities, heritage, and values. Organisations and facilitators – especially those who work with Muslim families but are not part of the Muslim community – must be conscious of this context.

Due to these experiences of cultural insensitivity when engaging with mainstream services, parents are reluctant to attend parenting programs they perceive as not aligned with their cultural worldviews. In an ideal scenario, and to increase overall and effective engagement, it is important for migrant parents to see cultural representation in service delivery as it can mitigate parental concerns surrounding judgement and fear of institutional intervention. Parents are better able to open-up to practitioners/service providers they can communicate and identify with. Currently, there is a lack of specialised training for migrant community members to be able to play the role of parent educator. Within the next five years, it would be highly important to develop training programs that support this gap. Increasing cultural representation in delivery of programs can contribute towards maintaining culturally safe spaces for parents, which in turn increases the effectiveness of CaPS programs.

When delivered effectively, we have found that the parents we work with benefit from the information and messages they receive from the parenting programs. Participants have communicated that they tailor their parenting styles based on new information, parenting strategies, and skills they acquire. Many have communicated that they feel they are better able to respond to children's needs and support them with challenges they face at home and/or within their community. This may include mothers advocating on behalf of their children so that they are able to fully participate in all aspects of life without intervention from other members of the family or community. Parents who have participated in CaPS workshops have the capacity to act as a

secondary source of information dissemination and as an agent of change within their communities.

While parents are generally satisfied with these outcomes, we have found that they still face significant challenges when advocating for children in other spheres of their lives. For example, when children face bias, bullying, and/or discrimination at school, parents have reported that schools are dismissive of their concerns. Parents are often refused the opportunity to advocate on behalf of their children in these spaces. In situations where they are able to voice their concerns, institutions often fall short of taking any substantial action towards addressing these issues. As such, we are finding that there is a growing need for parents to receive individual support when they interact with schools to advocate for their children.

In light of this context and evolving or underserved needs within the community, the Department needs to be aware that support for child development and support for parents is not just about children's cognitive development. It also involves supporting children and young people navigate complex social environments, which for Muslim communities intersects with experiences of discrimination, targeting, and politicisation of their communities. This is why cultural safety within programs is so integral to a program's success, and without naming and addressing these contextual factors and socio-political environments, programs will do a disservice to parents and children whose challenges are often directly tied to issues of safety, belonging, and inclusion.

Recommendation 2: That the Department provide opportunities and directives to achieve:

    a) upskilling of bi-cultural workers to increase cultural representation within programs; and

    b) capacity building training for facilitators working interculturally, with key focus on

        i. structural and interpersonal discrimination, racism, and Islamophobia;

        ii. cultural contexts and considerations;

        iii. intersectionality; and

        iv. anti-racist and strengths-based practices.

Need for flexibility in working across different locations

The key to AMWCHR's success in the delivery of our programs, including our CaPS program, is our responsiveness to community need. One way that this need presents is in terms of program location. AMWCHR is based in Melbourne's CBD, and our programs take place in various locations across the state and in particular metropolitan Melbourne. We operate an outreach model – going out to community members rather than asking them to come to us. This means that we rent local community spaces that are conveniently located for our participants to encourage attendance, especially for women who have limited access to transport. This model has always been successful for us as it allows us to move around Victoria on the basis of community need, and to maintain a presence within multiple areas in our assigned LGAs – thereby supporting a diverse group of women in terms of geographic location as well as cultural, ethnic, and religious background.

In previous structures of the CaPS program, this flexibility in service delivery was in alignment with the conditions of the funding. However, in recent years, the administrative requirements have changed. The Department now requires services to maintain a consistent and ongoing presence within pre-specified geographic locations across the duration of the funding period, where previously, the program did not dictate structure, so long as overall targets were met at the end of the delivery period. For example, if our target was 20 workshops in a particular LGA, we could deliver these workshops to two groups across 10 consecutive weeks of sessions. Now, the program specifies that we must be delivering consistent workshops throughout the delivery period - i.e., splitting those 20 weekly workshops across 20 monthly sessions. While the new model may suit organisations that have a permanent present within a geographic area, for us, this is not only logistically difficult, but more importantly, is less effective. We know from our many years' experience having delivered parenting programs that intensive consecutive weekly sessions are more successful in promoting learning and engagement than monthly workshops. A series of intensive weekly sessions create a regular routine of learning, and we have found that parents focus in on and retain the program content more successfully when engaged week by week. If parents are unable to attend a session, they can simply attend the following week, rather than have a two-month gap between workshops. The new requirements therefore restrict our ability to deliver our tried and tested best practice models, ultimately impacting the outcomes we are seeing within groups.

This structure also ties us to specific geographic locations. CAPS services are currently fixed to specified sites. To be responsive to needs of the community, we have found it essential to sometimes move the service delivery location to areas nearer to the communities to improve accessibility. The current reporting system does not provide flexibility for the agency to respond to community needs and move service outlets (within pre-approved LGAs) without the administrative hassle of changing and revising an Activity Work Plan and obtaining approval.

In all, these new structures and administrative hurdles have negatively impacted our ability to deliver the program in a way that is most effective for our community.

Recommendation 3: AMWCHR strongly recommends that the administrative requirements of CaPS are amended to be more flexible for funded agencies to deliver best practice models and to respond organically to community need.

Need for expanding the target age of children

The CaPS program allows organisations to develop programs that focus on parenting across different developmental periods and life stages. However, in line with the Department's internal review, we have observed that most services prefer to focus on parenting of children aged 0-12 years, with playgroups for younger children being a common program structure. Due to this trend, we express concern that CaPS may be on a trajectory towards becoming specialised in the early developmental years of children.

While early developmental years of children's lives are important to consider, we strongly believe that a focus on solely this age group may fail to take into account the needs of families with diverse structures – such as intergenerational families/extended families living together. Our work with communities recognises that many migrant families arrive in Australia with children of all ages – from infants to toddlers and preschoolers, primary schoolers, and teens. As mentioned previously, there are also very specific challenges that arise when children head into their adolescence, and parents are often at a loss as to how to manage these challenges in a cross-cultural parenting environment. When parents are only developing parenting skills for their younger children, it can lead to conflicting parenting styles between children, which may then create discord within family structures. In some circumstances it may even diminish the positive impact of the CaPS program, especially in cases where younger children witness parenting styles adopted in the parenting of

older children that may not align with CaPS goals. Parenting, for many families, does not occur in a vacuum but in tandem with other relationships - both within the family and the broader community.

While the Department does not advise organisations to develop programs strictly for parenting of younger children, it does have purview over which programs it funds. We would therefore encourage future funding guidelines to encourage the development of CaPS programs and content focussed on parenting older children, and that the Department allocates funding to such programs.

Recommendation 4: That the Department encourages and funds organisations to develop CaPS programs focussed on parenting of older children and parenting across age ranges to fill a crucial support gap.

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