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What are your current biggest priorities and greatest challenges?

ANTOINETTE BRAYBROOK

CEO Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service, Victoria; National Convenor for the National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services Forum (NFVPLS)

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Funding uncertainty is the issue that's been driving us mostly in Victoria and nationally, since Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (FVPLS) lost status as a stand-alone program – the basis on which it has operated for the last 16 years – under the Federal Government's new Indigenous Advancement Strategy.

We won a reprieve in March, but some of the 14 FVPLS services across Australia were granted only 12 months' funding, and we have no CPI indexation or opportunity for increased funding across the terms of contracts. That puts a lot of pressure on our budgets and capacity to retain specialist staff. The uncertainty leading up to the decision also impacted strongly: we lost some staff and had to be very careful about how many clients we took on in case we couldn't support them in the longer term.

In terms of priorities, we have to be strong across all our work, including frontline services, where our lawyers are constantly working at capacity, and in our early intervention and prevention, so we build awareness and address the fear of Aboriginal women that reporting family violence may see them lose their children to Child Protection.

Our policy and advocacy work around identifying system failures is just as important, and we have welcomed the early work of the Royal Commission into Family Violence in Victoria. We will be looking for it to call for approaches that recognise the over-representation of Aboriginal women and children in family violence and invest strongly in early intervention, prevention, culturally safe frontline services, housing, and better responses from police, courts, child protection and Corrections.

HELEN COONEY

CEO, Caroline Chisholm Society, Pregnancy and Family Support Service

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I want to quote Thomas Piketty or someone to show I'm well-read, but our biggest priority is actually helping parents provide nurturing environments for their children. That is often freeing them from poverty, violence and homelessness, but they also need help with psychosocial development.

In the context of recent epigenetics, it is hard to find a higher priority than strong mother-infant interactions for development. The research at cellular and physiological levels tells us about the environmental factors turning genes on and off. To some extent, disadvantage is hereditary and this research shows that you can break that genetic cycle if you change the environment in which babies grow. If you haven't already done so, do track down the 'Lick Your Rats' study (from the Genetic Science Learning Center at the University of Utah). It is persuasive. Baby rats with better care grew up to be better carers. Not that human babies are the same as rats!

The challenge? For Caroline Chisholm it is balancing the demand for high volume early intervention services (such as parenting groups) in the face of increasing demand from complex families (who we help with home-visiting integrated casework). We have always done both, but the balance is shifting in the wrong direction. That's expensive for everyone.

