

New national counselling framework

When a person goes missing it can have a devastating impact on families, friends and colleagues. For some, the trauma of unresolved loss can have long-term ramifications.

The police and other search agencies provide the main assistance for families when a member goes missing, but those families have additional needs which have yet not been fully met by the range of support available. A new national counselling framework has been developed by the AFP to support and engage families without adding to the ambiguity and uncertainty they experience when someone goes missing.

Supporting those who are left behind, consists of a video and booklet and is the first of its kind to be published in Australia. It is part of a training package designed to provide health practitioners and professionals with new skills in understanding the trauma and impact experienced by the families and friends of missing persons.

The document was launched in Sydney on 31 October 2007 by the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre and coincided with the Morcombe Foundation's Day for Daniel. Daniel Morcombe went missing in Queensland four years ago and is one of many that go missing in Australia every year.

AFP National Manager Economic and Special Operations Peter Drennan spoke



Photos: Greg Primmer

Author Sarah Wayland is a counsellor who has worked in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

at the launch and highlighted key facts about missing persons.

"Each year in Australia, 30,000 people are reported missing to police – an average of one person every 18 minutes," he said. "For every missing person reported to police, at least 12 other people are affected whether it is emotionally, financially, physically or psychologically. That's a significant number of people who experience the trauma of unresolved loss."

Author Sarah Wayland is a counsellor who has worked in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom in the

fields of trauma and unresolved loss. She explained the reasoning behind the need for such a framework.

"There is no model of counselling that allows health practitioners and professionals to adequately explore the specific needs of families who are left behind," Ms Wayland said. "While there is grief support available, it does not take into account the long-term ramifications of never gaining closure when a loved one's location remains unknown."

Ms Wayland said that through meeting with families, it had become evident that in the initial stages of a loved one's disappearance, families were overwhelmed with feelings of anxiety and ambivalence. The police and non-police search agencies were the primary support mechanisms.

"The focus however is on the physical location and return of the missing person," she said. "The emotional needs of the families are often set aside for these practical issues to be dealt with."

Assistant Commissioner Drennan agreed that the framework would assist counsellors to address the specific needs of families and allow law enforcement agencies to focus on, and better respond to, their main objective of physically locating missing persons."

Ms Wayland added that the framework had been developed over a number of years in consultation with national and

internationally colleagues and families of missing persons, including Bruce and Denise Morcombe who spoke at the launch.

“We hope that the combined work of the Foundation along with the efforts of the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre continue to support the need to locate and protect those who are missing, as well as support the families and friends who are left behind,” Mr Morcombe said.

For more information:

<www.afp.gov.au/national/missing> or

<www.danielmorcombe.com.au>

Right: Training package. Bottom right: AFP National Manager Economic and Special Operations Peter Drennan with Denise and Bruce Morcombe and author of the framework Sarah Wayland



“Health practitioners and professionals need to engage families in ways that help them find avenues to celebrate their loved ones in a sense not of remembering the loss, but acknowledging that, for now, they are not with them... When a person disappears, families can feel alienated by the community as there is no mechanism through which to acknowledge their loss. In death, there are the rituals of funeral, cremation or burial as well as the embracing of the emotions triggered by the loss. Historically, some families of the missing persons have been told their experience mirrors that of grief, however grief is associated with death, while the missing is associated with trauma. These are two different experiences.”
extract from *Supporting those who are left behind*

