

19 January 2011

**Submission Number: 537**  
**Date Received: 19/01/2011**

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The Secretary of the Committee  
Standing Committee on Regional Australia  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

And by email to: [ra.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:ra.reps@aph.gov.au)

Dear Secretary,

**Re: Inquiry into the impact of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in Regional Australia**

On Friday 21 January 2011 the Committee will hold a public hearing in Shepparton. I note that in addition to scheduled appearances, the Committee is inviting others interested in making comment to attend and either make oral statements or provide additional written submissions. FamilyCare will not be represented at the Shepparton hearing, but provides the following brief comments for the Committee's consideration.

**About FamilyCare:**

FamilyCare is a community-based not-for-profit organisation and has been providing services to families and individuals in the Goulburn Valley, Lower Hume and surrounding districts since 1984. FamilyCare's range of activities includes:

- Child and family services;
- A day-stay mother-baby support unit;
- A support program for refugee minors;
- Aged and disability care;
- Support and respite for carers;
- A no-interest loan scheme;
- Men's counselling; and
- Community development and outreach programs.

As well as ongoing programs, FamilyCare has had experience in providing localised responses to major disasters, including operating a Bushfire Case Management service after the February 2009 fires. With its main office in Shepparton, FamilyCare has offices and staff in Cobram, Seymour, Wallan, Alexandra, Yea and Kinglake.

## **The scope and limitations of our comments:**

There are a number of aspects of the Proposed Basin Plan (PBP) that require expert analysis. FamilyCare does not have that expertise and does not wish to comment on the substance of proposals contained in the PBP. We do however have both experience and expertise in dealing with the consequences of major change in the communities in which we operate. It is clear, regardless of whether the PBP proceeds in the manner recommended by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority, that the future management of water resources will have major change implications for rural and regional communities. Those changes are highly likely to impact on the levels of demand for community services already available in those communities and produce additional demands for new or changed services and supports.

With this as context, FamilyCare encourages the Committee to consider three important elements that impact the ability of community agencies to meet the needs of the communities they serve:

a) Services already available are inadequate:

Demand for services outstripping capacity is not a new issue for community agencies and we are well used to prioritising access, juggling periods of peak demand and the like. There are however service 'black spots' related specifically to the needs of rural and regional communities – expanded in point b) to follow.

b) The reality of situational disadvantage in accessing a range of necessary and interrelated services:

To state the obvious, rural and regional communities face challenges that either do not exist in larger population centres, or not to the same extent. Situational disadvantage plays out for FamilyCare and its clients in a variety of ways and contexts, some of which are already recognised at a policy level. For example, primary mental health services, particularly those targeted at men are totally inadequate, across our catchment area. The lack of service options not only places pressure on the tertiary end of health service provision it increases the instance of negative consequences for families, through relationship breakdown, domestic violence and the abuse and neglect of children.

FamilyCare and other like services try their best to develop lateral responses, often investing modest accumulated reserves in piloting new service options. In the absence of an effective funding base however it is very difficult to turn such initiatives into sustainable service models.

There is also a tendency to leave planning for the implications of change and challenge until after damage has been delivered. Responses to natural disasters like fire, flood and drought will always involve some reactivity. For rural and regional communities change is constant, particularly with the increased understanding of and focus on the implications of climate variations. The risks and attendant stress this constant state of flux creates for local communities and individuals is proportionately different than that felt in larger populations. What we need, but do not currently have, are supports that allow people to consider and work through their changed circumstances and in the process build individual and community resilience.

c) The dangers associated with ignoring local expertise and community connection:

FamilyCare recognises there are limitations on the availability of public funding for community support services. We also understand the management challenges in effectively monitoring the service activities of disparate services, often across large geographic areas.

These challenges have produced changes in funding policy that tend to favour larger community organisations, particularly those with a statewide or even national focus. Whilst in no way being critical of these organisations, many of which are valued colleagues in our service delivery activities, there is a tendency to devalue the importance of local and regional understanding and engagement. We should value the importance of local connection and knowledge more, to ensure rural and regional responses are reflective of actual needs.

Should the Committee require any further information, or clarification of these comments, please do not hesitate to contact me

Yours sincerely

**David Tennant**  
Chief Executive Officer