

The Benevolent Society Research Agenda (2009-2012)

The Benevolent Society is committed to undertaking high quality research that adds to the evidence around what works to create caring and inclusive communities and a just society. This is reflected in the current strategic plan (09-12) which places a strong emphasis on the role of research in helping to achieve results in communities and to grow our knowledge, leadership and capacity to influence social change in Australia.

This research agenda sets out a number of priority areas for research at The Benevolent Society. This includes research undertaken by The Benevolent Society itself or in partnership with other organisations. The purpose of this research agenda includes:

- to help guide decisions within The Benevolent Society around how research resources should be allocated
- to help guide decisions about seeking funds for research
- to communicate our research priorities to internal and external stakeholders
- to set out ideas for future research projects in order to encourage approaches from potential collaborators interested in these projects.

The research agenda has been developed in consultation with staff, in response to issues identified in previous research and evaluation projects and through a review of other organisations' research agendas (a list is provided in appendix one). This research agenda is intentionally broad as it reflects the range of social issues relevant to the Benevolent Society's work. The agenda is set out under seven priority areas including:

- the health and social inclusion of young children
- ageing well and the social inclusion of older people
- the role of communities in improving outcomes for individuals
- community safety and domestic violence
- evidence informed policy and practice
- program evaluation
- bicentennial project.

A separate evaluation framework covers our plans for the evaluation of our programs, over time, and the allocation of funds for this purpose.

1 The health and social inclusion of young children

The early years of a child's life are a critical window for positively influencing their long term physical and emotional health and wellbeing. A healthy and safe childhood starts with a loving family and a connected community, where children and their families have opportunities to learn and grow. Children and their families also need access to adequate incomes, secure housing and support services. We know however that many children do not have access to all these resources and that social exclusion compromises the wellbeing of many children.

The Benevolent Society prioritises research that builds on evidence around the key factors that influence the early years of a child's life and the support required by families to ensure that children get the best start in life. This includes research that helps improve services for vulnerable families as well as the development of universal services that meet the needs of all families.

Despite the focus on the early years The Benevolent Society also works increasingly with older children and young people and so we are also interested in research with these groups. With the

roll out of our Fostering Young Lives program in particular we are interested in research that explores effective support for children and young people in out of home care and their carers.

Current research being undertaken by The Benevolent Society in this area includes:

- the impact of area level unemployment on outcomes for children (in partnership with the Australian Institute for Family Studies)
- exploring the potential of advances in neuroplasticity to improve services for children
- implementing and evaluating a resilience based framework across our child and family services
- developing a kinship care practice framework.

Specific areas of interest for future research include but are not limited to:

- the role and impact of integrated service delivery on outcomes for children and families
- supporting children and families living in rural and regional areas and the impact of climate change on these children and families
- supporting the social inclusion of Indigenous children and families
- effective approaches to develop parenting skills
- effective approaches to engage fathers in the support of young families
- effective approaches to develop the capacity of the early childhood workforce
- the experiences and outcomes for children in kinship care and their carers
- children and young people's participation in service delivery and evaluation
- the economic inclusion of families with young children.

2 Ageing well and the social inclusion of older people and their carers

Australia has a rapidly ageing population with the proportion of people aged 65 and over expected to grow to 20% of the total population over the next 20 years and the numbers of people 85 years and over expected to double. This has considerable social and economic implications for Australians of all ages. Significant changes will be needed in government policies, resource distribution and service provision to ensure the social and economic inclusion of older people.

The Benevolent Society prioritises research that builds on evidence around what influences the social inclusion of older people and their carers as well as research on new forms of care, housing and social support that enable older people to stay at home until the end of their lives. The Society's focus is currently on those in need of assistance with activities of daily living, rather than on those in earlier years of retirement.

Current research being undertaken by The Benevolent Society in this area includes:

- developing a practice framework to build carers' resilience
- exploring the impact of community care services on the social and emotional wellbeing of older people and their carers.

Specific areas of interest for future research include but are not limited to:

- hearing the voices of older people in relation to ageing well
- new models of housing for older people
- new approaches to community care that promote autonomy
- carers' resilience
- preventing the abuse of older people and supporting victims of abuse
- innovative approaches to reduce the social isolation of older people

- building the capacity of the community care workforce.

3 The role of communities in improving outcomes for individuals

Neighbourhoods should be safe and supportive places that promote participation in social, educational and economic life. Inclusive communities nurture good relationships with others and provide individuals and families of all backgrounds with the same access to services and resources. The growing disparity in income and employment opportunities however is reshaping the face of Australia's communities, concentrating social and economic disadvantage in specific towns and suburbs.

The Benevolent Society prioritises research that builds on the evidence around the role communities play in improving the lives of individuals. In particular we are interested in the role of communities in affecting the lives of children and young people and their families, older people and their carers and the role that community participation can play through e.g. volunteering. We also prioritise research that explores the development of services that work with the whole of community to improve outcomes for individuals.

Current research being undertaken by The Benevolent Society in this area includes:

- longitudinal research exploring the impact of a school based intervention on levels of social capital among young people and their families in two disadvantaged communities (in partnership with UWS)
- exploring Children's views of social capital and their communities (in partnership with UWS, ANU and NAPCAN)
- resilience of children and young people in rural areas (in partnership with UNE)

Specific areas of interest for future research include but are not limited to:

- The role of community in improving outcomes for older people and their carers
- The impact of the work of our volunteers on outcomes for communities.

4 Community safety and domestic violence

One in three Australian women experience domestic violence during their lives and violence against women is the most common abuse of human rights in Australia and around the world. Women with children are three times more likely to be subjected to domestic violence than women without children. There is an array of services to support women and their children who are victims of domestic violence however they operate in a largely uncoordinated, underfunded context which means that women often do not get the support they need to recover and rebuild their lives.

The Benevolent Society prioritises research that builds evidence around what works to prevent domestic violence and to promote the safety and protection of women and children who are victims of domestic violence.

Past research undertaken by The Benevolent Society in this area includes:

- 'Moving Forward' research undertaken in 2008 which explored the longer term impact and support needs of victims of domestic violence after leaving an abusive relationship
- exploring the views of counsellors and experiences of women about negotiating child contact with the abusive ex-partner in the family law environment.

Specific areas of interest for future research include but are not limited to:

- numbers of Australian women who are experiencing the long-term impacts of domestic violence and access for these women to support services

- Aboriginal women's empowerment as a means of building the capacity of NSW Aboriginal communities to reduce violence, overcome its traumatic impacts and increase access to justice
- public awareness of and attitudes to domestic violence
- evaluation of services for children exposed to domestic violence
- effective interventions for working with families where domestic violence and child protection issues exist.

5 Evidence informed policy and practice

The Benevolent Society is particularly interested in the translation of research findings into implications for policy and practice in a form that is useful and accessible to practitioners and policy makers. This includes pulling together the findings of existing research to inform policy and practice as well as ensuring that we draw policy and practice implications from the findings of our own research and evaluation projects as well as drawing out implications from our own practice wisdom.

Current research being undertaken in this area includes:

- the development of research to practice briefings for community care workers on older people and abuse and on supporting CALD older people
- the development of a number of practice guides (in partnership with the Australian Institute for Family Studies)
- the development of a research to practice briefing that summarises our work on attachment matters, PIEC and strengths-based practice
- research snapshots summarising findings from our research and evaluation projects that outline recommendations for policy and practice.

6 Program evaluation

Evaluation results are an important source of research evidence and The Benevolent Society is committed to evaluating a number of its larger programs. The main purpose of these evaluations is to help us determine whether these programs are effective and how we can improve them, however we are also committed to disseminating these results more widely to add to the evidence base around what works to support disadvantaged communities. We are also interested in the role of NGOs as knowledge producers through evaluation and are interested in research that explores the issues NGOs face in undertaking program evaluation and the factors that support effective program evaluation.

7 Bicentennial project

In 2013 The Benevolent Society will celebrate its 200 year anniversary. As part of these celebrations we are exploring options for undertaking a large scale research project that will report during this year. Some ideas being explored include a detailed history of The Benevolent Society, and developing social cohesion indicators for communities.

Appendix 1

A review of other organisations' research agendas and priorities was undertaken to help inform the development of this research agenda. These organisations included:

- Aged and Community Services Australia (ACSA)
- Aged Services Learning and Research Centre
- Ageing Research Online
- Alzheimer's Australia
- Anglicare
- ARC/NHMRC Research Network in Ageing Well
- Australian Association of Gerontology
- Australian Centre for Child Protection
- Australian Centre for Evidence Based Aged Care, Latrobe University
- Australian Centre on Ageing, University of Queensland
- Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI)
- Australian Institute of Family Studies
- Australian Primary Health Care Institute
- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)
- Bapcare
- Brotherhood of St Laurence
- Centre for Ageing Studies, Flinders University
- Centre for Education and Research on Ageing
- Centre for Health Service Development, University of Wollongong
- Centre for Research in Social Inclusion, Macquarie University
- Centre for Research on Ageing, Curtin University
- Community Care Northern Beaches
- Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (DADHC)
- Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA)
- Hammond Care
- Healthy Ageing Research Cluster
- National Ageing Research Institute, University of Melbourne
- National Agenda for Early Childhood Framework
- National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children
- National Seniors Australian Productive Ageing Centre
- NSW Commission for Children and Young People
- NSW Department of Community Services
- Parenting Research Centre
- Research Centre for Gender, Health and Ageing, University of Newcastle
- Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC)
- Silver Chain
- Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC)
- Uniting Care Ageing