

SMCFA & SMFVRIC
Child and Family Working Group (0-10)

Morning Series Summary:
**IFAS Independent Family Advocacy
and Support**

Tuesday August 26th

Guest Speakers: Yasmin Knight & Neil Boyack

Our Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of Country: We acknowledge the people of the Boonwurrung, Bunurong and Wurundjeri tribes of the Kulin Nation who are the traditional owners and custodians of the Aboriginal land of our region. We recognise their continued connection to the land and waters and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. It always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

We embrace diversity in all its forms, and respect everyone's strengths and contributions irrespective of gender, ethnicity, culture, religious beliefs, sexual orientation and political views.

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W: <https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/independent-family-advocacy-and-support>

For additional information:

About IFAS

Independent Family Advocacy and Support (IFAS) provides non-legal advocacy and support to parents and primary carers who are involved in the child protection system at the early stages. Their dedicated advocates work with parents/carers to identify what you need, how to get there and support to understand their rights and responsibilities in the system.

IFAS is not a legal service but can refer to legal advice or other supports. They are an independent, non-judgemental service, focusing on ensuring that the rights of primary carers and families are upheld and that carers feel like they are an active participant in the decisions about the care and wellbeing of their family.

IFAS is confidential, free and voluntary. They respect everybody's individuality and culture and aim to work to make sure everyone feels safe and supported by the service.

- **How they can help**
- Give information and support to understand and act on your rights and responsibilities in relation to child protection
 - Listen to what you want and talk about options
 - Help to understand the situation and what you may need to do
 - Work with you so you can have your say
 - Speak directly to other professionals on your behalf
 - Refer to helpful and culturally safer services if needed
 - **Who they can help**
 - IFAS works with parent or primary carers who:
- Have current involvement with child protection (at either the unborn report, investigation, or substantiation stage)
 - Have not been to court in relation to their current child protection case
 - The parents or primary carers must live or work in:
 - Northern, Eastern or Western Melbourne
 - Southern Melbourne (except Bayside Peninsula)
 - Greater Bendigo and Loddon region
 - Greater Ballarat and Central Highlands region
 - Greater Geelong and Barwon region
 - Horsham, Warrnambool and the Wimmera south-west region

IFAS offers more intensive support to First Nations families, parents with an intellectual disability, families from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background, parents subject to an unborn report, and parents who experienced child protection involvement when they were children.

"Above information taken from Legal Aid website"

Presentation Notes:

- Yasim and Neil are both advocates based at VLA (Victorian Legal Aid) in Dandenong.
- Yasmin has a background in Child Protection and Youth Justice as well as in the Public Prosecution Office.
- Neil has worked in the sector for 25 years in a variety of roles such as Child Protection practitioner, Family Services manager and practitioner, Family Group Conferencing and Kinship and Foster Care. Neil has done a lot of work in rural areas including the pilot program of IFAS and now based in Dandenong.
- Service came about after VLA undertook child protection review in 2017. Some of the outcomes had themes around could court have been avoided for families and resources, time and money saved as well as stress for families.
- IFAS works alongside Child Protection and has built on the experience of their sister program Independent Mental Health Advocacy. Both programs are informed by lived experience both in workforce and in how the programs have been implemented and created.
- Pilot started in 2018 and became statewide as of September 8th, 2025.
- Service is free, confidential and non-judgemental.
- **What is IFAS?**
- Representational advocacy- instructions from clients. It is about standing together to amplify voices that may otherwise go unheard. It ensures individuals and communities are included in decision making processes, promote fairness, and empowers people to influence outcomes that affect their lives. Supporting Self-Advocacy- The individual themselves speak, a person understands their rights, expresses their need and make their own decisions. The focus is on empowerment and independence.
- They help family members to get information on their rights, responsibilities and understanding of the Child Protection system.
- They support families to make decisions that are in the best interests of their children/families
- They have and offer a shared experience and support advisory group participants.
- IFAS provide information and coaching for self-advocacy to the CALD community, people who experience family violence, the LGBTQIA+ community or parents and carers who experience mental health problems and other disabilities. The research shows that these communities are over-represented in the Child Protection system.
- **What does IFAS do?**
- Advocates represent the parent or carer's views and preferences and assist with navigating and engaging with services including Child Protection practitioners.
- Advocates do not undertake assessments or provide their opinions. The advocacy model supports people to speak up for themselves and their family, have someone "walk alongside" them, clarify their views and concerns and foster improved understanding of their situation and the Child Protection system, advocates know they system well.
- Advocates will not share information without the consent of clients, any information shared with an advocate will be shared with the client.
- **Criteria**
- Child protection involvement at investigation / pre-court/ unborn report. Priority areas include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, parents with an intellectual disability, CALD communities, parents with unborn report, parents who have a history of Child Protection involvement.
- IFAS provides practical information, referrals and support to anyone who contacts the service.
- **Benefits**
- Families get information about Child Protection concerns, processes, and requirements at a time when they are open to absorbing the information in a contrastive and reflective way.
- Support to identify their own strengths and challenges in an environment that is non-threatening, and solutions focussed.
- Support to develop plans that address the concerns and highlight the strengths and supports that the family has in place. Support to communicate these plans/ideas to Child Protection.
- Support to carry out plans and collect evidence that can be supplied to DFFH for the purpose of risk assessment.
- Parents report feeling engaged and in control of the process and their door stays open during the investigation, which is easier for Child Protection to assess safety. Advocates can break down some fear and confusion families may have when being faced with Child Protection involvement.
- Advocates can attend care team meetings, office meetings, support clients to debrief and ensure they understand the outcomes of meetings.
- Can also be involved in FPR clients as well. Possibly more early stages of an FPR family. Advocating for client voice in case plans. Would make sure different roles are clear from start of involvement.

Contact information

1800 849 200- Monday to Friday 9:00am-4:00pm from September 8th, 2025.

ifascontact@vla.vic.gov.au