# IFAS final evaluation summary

## About IFAS

Independent Family Advocacy and Support (IFAS) provides nonlegal advocacy to parents and primary carers in the early stages of child protection involvement. IFAS aims to support informed decision-making and engagement between families and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH), to avoid court proceedings where possible. IFAS prioritises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, families where one or both parents have an intellectual disability, and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. We also work with clients where an unborn report has been made. IFAS uses a representational advocacy model. Our advocates are led by the client’s wishes and do not make judgements about what may be in the best interests of a client or their family. Our model supports people to speak up for themselves and their families, helps clarify their views and concerns and fosters improved understanding of their situation and the child protection system.

In 2018 the three-year IFAS pilot started in the Darebin/Moreland and Greater Bendigo areas and in late 2020 expanded to greater Ballarat. IFAS employs four advocates and has a client advisory group called Shared Experience and Support (SEaS) and a Lived Experience Consultant. In 2020-21, IFAS provided support to 150 families.

## The evaluation and key findings

The IFAS pilot was independently evaluated by RMIT’s Social and Global Studies Centre over three years.

### Parents and primary caregivers highly valued the advocacy and support in system navigation

Parents said:

* IFAS helped them understand child protection processes,
* IFAS helped them speak up for themselves and stand up for their rights
* IFAS supported them to express themselves in a way that helped them to communicate better with child protection
* They trusted IFAS workers
* IFAS helped to link them to other services they needed such as legal services
* IFAS helped child protection work with them to support their children

*I’m going to cry [laughs]. Because it’s been a difficult time and I think, with families that’s going through so much, I think, to have that extra help, just extra guidance, you feel like, you know, at least there’s someone there for you that can understand you, that’s not going to judge you and so forth.*

*So, I think everyone, if they have someone like that, like an advocate, like me, it will help them too.* Parent

### IFAS successfully reached priority groups

25% of clients were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and 20% parents had an intellectual disability. Parents IFAS worked with reported very high levels of cultural safety.

IFAS should be available for everyone because your

*IFAS should be available to everyone because your brain goes to mush. You’re emotional. It’s terrifying to think that the worst thing could happen. And to have somebody who was really supporting you in that, it’s a service that is fantastic.*  Parent

### Most child protection practitioners and other key stakeholders found IFAS was helpful.

Child protection workers said:

* IFAS helped parents and child protection to communicate better
* IFAS helped parents to understand child protection’s concerns
* IFAS helped child protection workers to understand parents concerns.

### IFAS helped families avoid court

One in five client families supported by IFAS avoided going to court for their child protection matter.

### IFAS saves money

By helping at least 20% of families avoid court, IFAS saves the Victorian Government $2.66 for every dollar invested. It can also reduce the length of time that child protection is involved with families.

## Recommendations and suggestions

* IFAS should be expanded and made available to any parent or care giver who wants support in the pre-court stages of the child protection system in Victoria.
* IFAS should expand its priority groups to include people experiencing mental health issues, people who use drugs and people who experience family violence.
* IFAS should work with Child Protection to improve workforce knowledge about its model
* IFAS needs to continue consulting their lived experience consultant and client advisory group, to ensure the service continues to meet the needs of families.

## Next steps

IFAS received Victorian Government funding to continue providing the service until June 2024. We will speak to our partners in Child Protection, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and other services to continue promoting the service, increase understanding of the IFAS model and discuss opportunities for continuous improvement. We will also explore options to expand IFAS state-wide so that all eligible families can access this service.