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Title: Capacity Building and Service Delivery of Relationship Support in Australia

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Due to concern about strengthening families and reducing relationship breakdowns, marriage and relationship support is currently attracting attention and increased funding from the Australian federal government. This paper provides an analysis of the capacity to deliver marriage and relationship education programs (MRE) in diverse governance arrangements. A public policy question concerns how these programs may assist in sustaining stable families. Governments face a range of challenges that lead to dilemmas of dispersed policy capacity.

This paper examines the capacity problems that policy makers confront in relation to delivering MRE programs. Initiatives to strengthen relationships are premised on bringing service providers into government to improve capacity. There are three major concerns in this service delivery area: implementation, evaluation and moving into the private sphere. First, a range of difficulties concern implementation because policy capability is diffuse, located in numerous organizations with different clients with diverse needs. This raises questions about how to coordinate and deliver services effectively. Second, there are problems of evaluation as rigorous assessment of services in the field is rare. Policymakers have insubstantial data about the value of the programs and insufficient capacity to evaluate them. Third, policy makers are targeting matters of the heart, which raise sensitive issues that impact on capacity. Governments cannot force couples to participate or engage with MRE programs because many people regard their relationships as private. Delivering MRE is particularly challenging because it attempts to use preventive strategies at a positive stage in people's relationships when they are not confronting problems. Overall government's capacity is restricted and is not operating directly on the front line. Apart from funding particular organizations and administering the programs, therefore, governments may have limited leverage to manage the MRE programs on offer.

The old style of 'one size fits all' bureaucratic intervention does not work in service provision to areas such as aged care, health and AIDs. This is also the case with delivering MRE - skills programs that attempt to improve personal relationships - where the system of governance is complex and messy. While strategies to support stronger relationships have triggered extensive debates in the disciplines of psychology, sociology and family studies, there has been little discussion from a public administration perspective. Yet the issue is inherently political, testing not only governments' capacity to deliver services, but also the legitimacy of their intentions and the extent to which promoting the principles of healthy relationships is an appropriate responsibility for the state. These are concerns of policy capacity.

The Australian federal government is attempting to build policy capacity to manage and respond effectively to current problems concerning marriage and relationships. Divorce rates are stable but rather high - each year, more than 50,000 Australian marriages end in divorce. Governments understand and articulate the problem of marital instability in terms of the financial, legal and social costs of divorce and single parenthood, for the public purse, families and society as a whole. A decade ago, the cost of divorce has been calculated at more than \$3 billion per annum (House of Representatives Standing Committee, 1998, p. 51). This includes social security benefits, social services, legal aid, health and welfare. Marriage and relationships programs are seen as preventative measures that will lower the expense of marriage and family separation.

By examining three major capacity challenges concerning implementation, evaluation and intervening in the private sphere, this paper argues that the implications of capacity constraints need to be considered. First, implementation capacity is difficult because governments are dealing with complex sets of organizations drawn from the public, private and voluntary sectors. Governments must manage competing demands from a range of policy actors delivering services to a diverse group of clients. The risk of policy confusion tends to increase, inevitably intensifying the complexity of the policy framework. Second, public funding is being spent on MRE, so we need to know how effective the programs are. It is important that the benefits of the programs are clearly evident. This relates to the third challenge: governments are attempting to facilitate people's personal relationships. It is difficult for governments to encourage couples to gain information and skills about personal relationships as this is usually considered to be a private matter.

The paper draws on evidence from government inquiries and reviews, reports from the service providers and interviews with various policy actors and service providers that highlights the challenges for governments attempting to build capacity in the provision of marriage and relationships services. This provision entails a large scale of multifaceted, specialized and fragmented policy making. The considerable number of actors add to the complexity of service delivery. A key point of this paper is that these actors need each other in ways that affect the capacity to deliver services. Governments rely on the service providers' knowledge, cooperation and specific administrative capacity. In return, service providers receive crucial funding and structural support from governments. These resources, however, are often insufficient, thereby restricting capacity building which could contribute to better client outcomes.

Building Policy Capacity

Capacity building means many different things from different perspectives, in both theory and practice. The prevailing ethos is that governments must become more interested in service to clients (Peters, 1996, p. 7). This requires new forms of public service delivery. Policy capacity includes the implementation capacity of the system, formulating clever and potentially effective policies and the political capacity to respond to changing demands from interest groups and the public (Peters, 1996). Davis supports a similar position, arguing that the essence of policy capacity is ‘the ability of governments to decide and implement preferred courses of action’ (2000, p. 231). Cuthill (2005, p. 65) views capacity building as a collaborative process between governments and the community, where each group acknowledges their roles and responsibilities. Capacity requires investing in people, organizations and networks. Community capacity building efforts are tempered, however, by considerations of power and existing government values, policies and operational processes.

Bakvis (2000) describes policy capacity as the ‘intellectual dimension of governance, that is, the capacity of the system to think through the challenges it faces’ (p. 73) This implies that organizational matters and infrastructure should allow the best possible utilization of knowledge during the actual policy making process. Governments are willing to create policy capacity using other means, to draw on surrogates and external sources of policy advice, advice that in former times may have been generated by those inside government. Painter and Pierre (2005a, p 2) perceive policy capacity as ‘the ability to marshal the necessary resources to make intelligent collective choices about and set strategic directions for the allocation of scarce resources to public ends’ and also to ‘win and maintain consent for policy decisions’ (2005b, p. 255). References to ‘public ends’ highlight the significance of interdependent links between the political process and civil society. The capacity of societies to make effective choices to address policy challenges is dependent on the larger scale political and cultural environment and system-wide institutional structures (Painter and Pierre, 2005b). These definitions illustrate the dimensions of capacity that extend beyond the government and public service. First is the capacity to implement policies to tackle a problem. Second is the capacity to develop particular strategies to evaluate programs and their effectiveness. Third is the question of how capacity confronts particular problems in a particular sector. There are many challenges in building capacity. For example, there are difficulties with the ‘intelligent choice’ perspective because policies are often implemented in a disorganized and uncertain environment, making it difficult to routinely make smart choices. This is particularly the case when dealing with issues concerning people’s personal relationships.

Governments have quite clear policy objectives in the area of strengthening families and encouraging healthy relationships. MRE aims to develop communication and conflict management skills throughout the life cycle so that, as a family relationships brochure puts it ‘couples and families are building stronger and happier relationships right from the start’ (Australian Government, 2008). How these goals are delivered and with what outcomes depend on available resources, strategies and skills, the intellectual understanding of relationship education; and the amenability of MRE to the available policy instruments.

Government Funding and Service Delivery

The rationale for government facilitation of marriage support programs is not new. Funding of marriage education has occurred (albeit in small amounts) since the 1940s when the churches focused on preventing marriage breakdown. The Commonwealth government introduced a national *Marriage Act* in 1961 which empowers it to fund marriage education services. The *Family Law Act 1975* also provided funding for agencies and organizations which offered marriage education. In the late 1990s, funding increased as a result of a report by a House of Representatives Standing Committee (1998) which examined ways of addressing the growing divorce rates. The major recommendations of this committee's report *To Have and to Hold: Strategies to Strengthen Marriage and Relationships* argued for expanding marriage and relationship services to reach more than the level of 20 per cent at that time. Consequently, the government provided more funds via the Family Relationships Services Program (FRSP). Other services provided under the FRSP umbrella include family relationship counselling, family relationships mediation and education, adolescent mediation and family therapy, men's relationships skills training and children's contact services.

The federal government funds approximately 100 community organizations in approximately 400 locations to deliver marriage and relationship services to more than 135,000 clients each year (Department of FaCS, 2003, p. 3). It spent approximately \$4 million annually throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s and increased that figure by 30 per cent annually in the early 2000s. This assisted in providing a pay rise for low paid staff in agencies which were minimally staffed and faced challenges with the logistics of providing services. The federal government has endeavoured to implement a range of strategies: marketing MRE to civil marriage celebrants, subsidizing the costs of education by accredited providers and developing web-based resource materials to promote education as socially normative and desirable (Simons and Parker, 2002).

The government is also attempting to broaden the reach of its family policies. Funding in the area of relationship services has recently increased quite markedly. The latest family law reform package addresses concerns raised in the House of Representative Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs report *Every Picture Tells a Story* (2003). The \$397 million package has two main policy objectives: making the process of separation and divorce easier, but also trying to prevent relationship breakdowns and strengthen marriages. In relation to the first objective, changes to the law and courts aim to develop practical measures for resolving disputes and to consider what is in the best interests of children whose parents are separating. As part of the federal government's initiatives, it established 65 Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) with the goal of providing mediation, counselling and dispute resolution services for separating couples. The second objective is to provide early intervention and skills development and expand marriage education services (Attorney-General's Department, 2005). These objectives trigger capacity challenges.

To date, most of the funding and capacity of the 2005 reforms to family law has been directed towards family dispute resolution. Given the difficult legal, economic and emotional issues associated with setting up a complex legal system, the focus on the 'problem' end of the relationship spectrum is unsurprising. As the above figures suggest, the cost of funding early intervention and prevention programs has been relatively low in terms of government budgetary outlays. It is only within the last few years that expenditure is increasing with the establishment of FRCs. Augmenting

funding for MRE potentially could result in improved service delivery, although as we will see below, providers have been struggling up till now. Despite some consistent funding since the 1960s, the programs have been framed with inadequate commitment to building capacity in the field. Moreover, levels of indexation have been inadequate to ensure that funding keeps pace with cost increases. For example, there has been incapacity to meet increasing costs in information technology and commercial rent, which has significant flow on effects to service delivery (FRSA, 2008, p. 14). It may be the case that these agencies have the potential to undertake service delivery in flexible ways, but they are often lacking sufficient resources.

Implementation and Distributed Policy Capacity

The policy objective of strengthening families raises many capacity challenges for governments and non-government organizations that deliver MRE programs. Policy capacity is dispersed across many agencies. The approach to implementation depends on the particular needs of the clients and the available resources of the agencies. Programs are delivered locally in response to couple needs, but with a range of client demands, learning approaches and skill training (see Halford and Simons, 2005). Investment in these primary prevention programs, however, tends to lag behind investment in programs and services that are experiencing difficulties (FRSA, 2008, p. 20). Most courses are taught to groups rather than to individual couples, as this is less expensive and less labour intensive. They are between 8 to 20 hours in duration and standard topics cover family backgrounds; expectations of marriage; intimacy and sexuality, communicating effectively and conflict resolution strategies. They are delivered in a range of settings by clergy, trained para-professionals, lay leaders and teachers with different values and beliefs on issues such as cohabitation and divorce. A range of implementation difficulties relate to agency networking; staff recruitment and retention; and meeting the needs of different clients and groups.

Agency Networks

While the churches and a variety of community groups and not-for-profit organizations support the government's family strengthening policies, they are not particularly vocal or visibly active around the issue of MRE, perhaps because they have been relative insiders for decades. Another reason is that the provision of MRE comprises only a small part of the services provided by the various agencies. Professional relationship services are delivered by providers from the three Industry Representative Bodies (IRBs): Family Services Australia which includes Anglican Church groups, Catholic Welfare Australia and Relationships Australia, which is not aligned to any religious organization. The major functions of the IRBs include counselling, mediation, parenting, aged care and dispute resolution, but they have insufficient time or resources to specifically lobby for marriage education services. Established in the 1990s, they are funded by the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS)¹ and the Attorney General's Department. Government subsidies allow the service providers to charge inexpensive fees, while people who cannot afford to pay should not be turned away or refused access (Department of FaCS, 2003, p. 3). Some agencies receive funding from state governments, churches and other benefactors. Some are linked to community legal centres, or are part of independent community organizations or in Church networks. The IRBs amalgamated in mid 2007 with the establishment of the

¹ It is currently called the Department of FaHCSIA with the inclusion of Housing and Indigenous Affairs in the portfolio.

Family Relationships Services Australia (FRSA) which represents all the agencies under one broad umbrella. To be a member, an organization must receive federal funding through the FRSP.

In relation to the more specific area of MRE, relationship educators and trainers are members of the Catholic Society for Marriage Education (CSME). Many educators who work for agencies attached to the CSME are also members of the Marriage and Relationship Education Association of Australia (MAREAA) a national professional association that brings practitioners together. The two bodies work closely: it is at the service provider level that attempts to lobby government are conducted. They also share information, participating in a biennial conference and producing a national magazine. Collaboration occurs on a regular basis between marriage educators, resulting in important contributions to the goal of improving client outcomes. For example, educators have worked together (and with government) to develop competency standards and a qualifications framework for their sector. Others design new training resources and 'share new information and teaching manuals and review how the classes are going' (interview, 2006).

These various strategies illustrate that educators working on relationship education collaborate with effective results. CWA praises the 'outstanding' labours of CSME and MAREAA, but raises a concern that relates to capacity:

In fact the excellent development of the Family Relationships Education program nationally runs on the passion and commitment of the people involved. It is testimony to their tenacity and dedication that such enormous results have been achieved for so long with so few resources (CWA, 2003, p. 16).

The implication here is that capacity could be improved if resources were more generous.

An important issue for MAREAA is how to link various church groups, service providers, celebrants and government into their network. For example, educators argued that networking should not just be happening between people in the field, but that public servants should be more active in developing connections with the service providers. Moreover, 'the government is not taking a leadership role' (interview, 2004). An educator noted that 'networking is hard enough to do at the state level, let alone with people in Canberra' (interview, 2004). Three years later, similar issues were raised by another agency representative. She said,

Networking is tough. Governments don't support it – it's not seen as important really. So networks work in spite of rather than because of what governments are doing. We just network with each other (interview, 2007).

Another stakeholder noted that 'there is vast competition for money' (interview, 2005). The interviews indicate that networking should be encouraged as a useful way of building capacity.

Staff Recruitment and Retention

It is not easy to attract, recruit and retain workers with the necessary expertise. This creates capacity difficulties. Staff may require specific cultural knowledge to work effectively with a particular cultural group. In addition, agencies often rely on

volunteers: this suggests that service providers do not have sufficient capacity to deliver the programs. The 2004 review of the wider FRSP stated that the sector faces recruitment and retention difficulties, mainly because the workforce consists of low paid workers and volunteers. It argued that low pay levels were due to restricted funding and increasing agency costs for insurance, superannuation and occupational health and safety (Urbis Keys Young, 2004a, p. 120). Staff earn 25 per cent less than people working in comparable positions in government sectors and still less relative to the private sector. This narrows the field of candidates for FRSP positions (Urbis Keys Young, 2004a, p. 121). More recent research by the FRSA suggests that inequity in salary levels continues: the community sector cannot match the generous remuneration packages offered by the private and public sectors. Further, there are 'critical staff shortages and competition for skilled workers' (FRSA, 2008, p. 11). It is difficult to attract experienced workers, while new graduates who enter the sector gain experience and then move on quickly to better paying work (FRSA, 2008, p. 12).

Another capacity issue concerning staff is that many workers 'tend to be middle class women of a certain age' (Urbis Keys Young, 2004a, p. 122). One educator commented: 'it is hard getting male staff, unless you get them as part of a couple. A lot of relationship education is out of working hours and men don't traditionally do this work' (interview, 2008). This is a problem if the sector wants to remain relevant to men and/or a younger group of potential clients.

Needs of Diverse Groups

The need to enhance the capacity of services to respond to the needs of diverse groups is another challenge. For example, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups often experience unique relationship needs, particularly refugee families who have a history of dislocation and/or trauma (FRSA, 2008, p. 19). An industry representative said 'providers are underfunded to begin with. They're oversubscribed and there is no money for interpreters, no training' (interview, 2007). In addition, there is an undersupply of suitably qualified Indigenous practitioners and traditional services models may be inappropriate or ineffective for Indigenous clients (FRSA, 2008, p. 17-18). There are also gaps in the provision of education services for groups such as young people, older couples, and people with a mental illness or intellectual disability (Simons and Parker, 2002). Other cohorts with particular needs include step families and gays and lesbians. Delivering programs on a large scale to rural and remote communities presents further challenges (Catholic Welfare Australia and the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2006). Low-income populations and disadvantaged groups may experience unemployment, domestic violence or drug abuse. They may require support via programs which provide access to job training, housing and health care as well as MRE programs.

These various issues demonstrate the difficulties in implementing the programs and building capacity.

Evaluation of Marriage and Relationship Education Programs

The question of how effectively MRE works for clients is critical. Policy makers have insubstantial data about the value and outcomes of the programs. It is important to note that at a wider level, MRE is being evaluated especially in the US. For example, think tanks in Washington DC such as the Urban Institute and Mathematica are conducting federally funded research and evaluation of marriage-related policies and programs (see

Macomber et al, 2005). In Australia, however, the capacity to conduct systematic evaluation of the programs is missing.

Programs such as the US designed Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) provide active relationship skills training. PREP is evidence-based, so that the concepts and skills taught are clearly developed from research findings. Controlled trials have found that PREP has short-term effectiveness (Halford and Simons, 2005). In Australia, providers do incorporate some skills training into their programs (Halford, 2000), but the most commonly used programs include Facilitating Open Couple Communication Understanding and Study (FOCCUS) and Premarital Preparation and Relationship Enhancement (PREPARE). These are self-reporting inventories assessing a range of issues and identifying strengths and concerns for premarried couples. A positive feature of the inventory-based approach is that programs such as PREPARE and FOCCUS can predict the trajectory of relationship satisfaction in the initial years of marriage (Larson and Olsen, 1989, Williams and Jurich, 1995). In some instances, couples realize they have problems that they need to resolve and may delay or even cancel their wedding (Halford and Simons, 2005, p. 150). However, outcomes studies on the use and effects of assessment instruments such as PREPARE have not been conducted (Stanley, 2001, p. 276).

There are no longitudinal evaluations in Australia, although studies have shown that couples find the programs valuable (see Harris et al, 1992). One educator raised two important questions: ‘how do you measure outcomes of relationship education? Can we distinguish between models of service delivery in terms of effectiveness?’ (interview, 2008). The main source of ‘evaluation’ is the quantitative data collected by FaCSLink. However, service providers see this as inadequate; one informed me that ‘data measures the number of clients I see, but it does not show the amount of hours I spend with each one. It doesn’t show up complex issues to do with their relationships difficulties’ (interview, 2005). The Review of the FRSP observed that,

Agencies argue that they get very little return on the substantial resources that they put into FaCSLink system. They say they would benefit from receiving reports on national, agency, and ideally practioner figures which would provide them with performance benchmarks and represent valuable practice management tools for them. It appears that FaCSLink has the capacity to provide many of these reports (Urbis Keys Young, 2004a, p. 162).

Nonetheless, there is a lack of evidence-based courses drawn from research findings, or systematic analysis of client outcomes. The availability of new funds for MRE through FRC channels may offer opportunities for conducting evaluation because the programs will have to meet a particular set of criteria. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that evaluation will be of a quantitative rather than a qualitative nature.

Matters of the Heart

MRE raises issues about the appropriate role for governments because it shines a spotlight on people’s intimacy and emotionally intense decisions and is directed toward changing their behaviour. Yet today, marriage is typically understood as a very private matter that is influenced by romantic myths of ‘living happily ever after’. Couples might therefore have doubts about governments facilitating education programs which aim to enhance their relationships.

The Role of Government

The private nature of relationships raises capacity question marks about how governments can shape the advancement of blossoming relationships through providing publicly funded programs. Should they even try to encourage couples to participate in programs that promise to improve communication skills and manage conflict? Undoubtedly, it is challenging for governments to intervene in what goes on behind closed doors or to regulate how individuals relate to each other in the privacy of their own homes, especially when they are not facing any specific hurdles. Yet this is precisely what governments are attempting. Of course the state has an interest in the domestic lives of couples and their children, whether they are married or not. Nevertheless, arguing that government has a positive case for intervention in people's relationships triggers capacity problems about how that intervention is handled and by whom, and from what motives: these issues will impact on the justification of the proper role for government.

Governments have limited capacity to persuade people to participate in the voluntary programs; they can encourage but not force them (unless they are conducted in conjunction with prisons, court ordered child welfare or domestic violence services). An industry representative asked the compelling question: 'what is the best way to engage people in relationship education?' (interview, 2008). Various inducements have been either offered or suggested to encourage participation such as providing child care, dinner and a monetary bonus on completion of the course. However, these types of incentives may not be sufficiently attractive to persuade all and sundry. Like campaigns raising public awareness about the availability of services relating to issues such as obesity, selling the message about the value of MRE programs is difficult. In fact, the private nature of decisions about marriage and relationships creates additional pressures for governments. Simons et al (1994) discovered that many couples think that the government should not interfere in their private relationship. They wish to deal with personal matters themselves.

Romantic Myths

Another challenge concerns romantic myths and perceptions that if a relationship is 'right', it should be 'easy'. This is exacerbated by the 'instant fix' mentality that many people have adopted: if their relationship becomes difficult they leave rather than work on problems that may take some time to deal with (Marriage and Relationships Educators' Association of Australia, 2008, van Acker, 2003). Moreover, the capacity to deliver MRE is influenced by timing issues. Potential clients may regard strategies such as skills training and completing questionnaires about relationships as inconvenient and unnecessary. Just before their wedding, many couples are involved in preparations: attending classes is an added stress and cost that they wish to avoid. After marriage, couples get caught up in domestic life and chores. Nevertheless, a manager of an MRE program is quite positive about people's changing attitudes towards relationship education:

I have seen a shift in couples' attitudes about attending programs over more recent years. ... I think that couples being older now at marriage are seeking information and they do this in a variety of ways...internet, books, friends and programs etc. I think the 'sell' is much easier now as we are working with a group of people who are part of what I call the information culture. You only

have to look at magazines and especially newspapers and their insert magazines to see that info about relationships and family etc are read widely and with interest (interview, 2008).

Her comments demonstrate that interest in relationship issues is increasing. The key is how to translate this interest into participation. If couples are interested in relationship matters, they may prefer guidance about self-help books or the Internet for resources rather than attending classes. Indeed, access to a wider population of clients may be possible by enhancing the capacity to design programs that are not delivered face to face but are available online.

Capacity Building Opportunities

Recent reports that examine the FRSP (Urbis Keys Young, 2004, CWA et al, 2006, FRSA, 2008) identified issues that are relevant for capacity building. The inadequacy of funding is a crucial area that requires attention. Delivering services ‘on the smell of an oily rag’, often relying on the enthusiasm and passion of the dedicated professionals’ is unsustainable (FRSA, 2008, p. 10). This is especially the case if the government agrees to employ professional staff and pay them accordingly, or if it ever decides to evaluate the programs or raise public awareness about the potential benefits of the programs. Some of the most obvious weaknesses of the wider FRSP program such as inadequate funding and limited coverage and fragmentation of services by agency and location (Urbis Keys Young, 2004, CWA et al, 2006) are especially pertinent to the MRE sector. It has been suggested that there is scope and need to strengthen the FRSP sector through increased contact, consultation and co-operation among funded agencies. Measures to promote and support inter-agency activity include, for example, joint training, cross-agency practitioner workshops, improved sharing of information and resources and joint research projects. The capacity for program managers to engage directly with service providers could be enhanced if the rapid turnover of bureaucrats in Canberra decreased and if managers were able to visit agencies and maintain a clear understanding of their work and the challenges they face (Urbis Keys Young, 2004, pp. xii-xiii).

Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated that the Australian government needs to consider the institutional capabilities which are to a growing extent contingent on their political capacity to muster public and private resources and to wield public and private organizational capabilities towards common objectives. Reach of governments into the private sphere is a difficult area for facilitation or intervention, so the cooperation of service providers is vital. Different actors are currently maintaining partnerships at the service delivery level, interacting regularly and putting a great deal of effort and energy into developing and delivering MRE. Various agencies are exchanging resources, but are dependent on other organizations for assistance – financial and otherwise - to achieve their goals.

Difficulties are unavoidable when dealing with changing attitudes and expectations of relationships, a greater variety of family types and living arrangements and diverse demands from community groups. This paper examined three broad challenges in relation to capacity building. First, implementation planning needs to be considered more carefully so that better links are developed between those who develop policy and those who deliver programs to address the lack of capacity to meet diverse

clients' needs. Second, substantial, long-term, qualitative evaluations of marriage and relationship programs are rare at present. Policy practitioners need to work with service providers to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of MRE. Third, service delivery capacity confronts particular challenges when attempting to enhance people's personal skills and knowledge. Raising awareness about the benefits and availability of the programs without appearing 'preachy' is also challenging.

There is no denying that MRE is a very complex policy area. Nevertheless, increased funding, clear intelligent choices and collaboration would assist in resolving some of the capacity problems currently being confronted.

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