

**Submission
No 34**

INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE

Organisation: Blue Mountains Community Interagency

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NSW Government Inquiry into Closing the Gap - Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage 2008

This submission is from Blue Mountains Community interagency, a group of over eighty services west of Sydney. We have contact with thousands of residents in our work. We appreciate the opportunity to submit to this Inquiry.

The Interagency is involved in a number of strategies to support indigenous organisations and families such as the BM Stronger Families Planning group which has a focus on vulnerable children including indigenous children. We endorse the recommendations that have already been forwarded to the Inquiry by the BM ANTaR group as detailed below.

Our Recommendations:

- Strengthen, fund and support locally based initiatives such as the BM Aboriginal Culture and Resource Centre and other initiatives. Ensure they have premises from which to develop a range of projects such as welfare, cultural and employment / business.
- Increase funding and resourcing to Link-up NSW
- Fund universal access to preschool and improve access to quality childcare for vulnerable children
- Fund the recommendations in the 'Break the Silence' Report
- Improve health outcomes through improving housing, education and employment initiatives.

Strengthen community organisations

Adequately fund indigenous organisations

The work of the local Blue Mountains Aboriginal Culture and Resource Centre (BM ACRC) demonstrates the value of community based community development work in strengthening local Indigenous pride, health and welfare and increasing employment opportunity, skill development and opportunities for innovation and initiative.

Blue Mountains Community Interagency is a regular Forum attended by representatives from Neighbourhood Centres, Family Support services, Community Development projects, Youth services, Disability services, Migrant services, Children's and Child Protection services, Community Housing and staff from Blue Mountains City Council, Sydney West Area Health Services, Centrelink and Employment services. It is convened by the Mountains Community Resource Network.

The organisation has run men's and women's projects, youth projects, art workshops, family support activities among a great number of other initiatives. Short term funding is a big problem - projects just get established when funds are withdrawn eg men's suicide prevention worker funded for two years.

The work of Link-Up NSW is important and under-resourced. They receive only \$50,000 from NSW State Government for Family Links staff. Funding of operational management will extend the work of the organisation exponentially. Removal issues impact on most indigenous families and re-connection with family is an important and intense process, requiring skilled support over a lengthy period to ensure success.

Fund development of innovation that supports indigenous people under pressure

BM ACRC is developing a post prison scheme for Indigenous people with Department of Corrective Services called the **Megalong Project**. This project will focus on strengthening relationships within family, building group support systems and increasing cultural connection. The model is based on international research in reducing recidivism and will save enormous amounts currently spent on prison sentences. - the work in this development should employ the local Indigenous person to bring the project to a point where significant funds might be allocated by relevant Government departments. The work of developing this proposal should employ the local Indigenous initiator to bring the project to a point where significant funds might be allocated by relevant Government departments.

Indigenous Language programs

We have a local small group, Gundungurra Language Revival, developing knowledge. They have produced a resource "Fun and Games in Gundungurra", which consists of well known children's songs on tape and book (eg 'heads shoulders. knees and toes'). It has been distributed through childcare centres, schools and many other places - this will increase all children's local recognition of one of our local languages. It has also be distributed overseas. It was developed on a budget of \$5,000 and volunteer labour. This type of project has many benefits and should be adequately funded to continue this work.

Indigenous Mental Health:

Indigenous mental health is impacted upon by the issues of generational removal, poverty and unemployment, stress and many other factors. The nationally developed ATSI Mental Health First Aid training should be made available extensively to indigenous professional and other people working with indigenous communities. This is a valuable resource in enabling communities to share and develop their mental health knowledge and support their communities.

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Children:

There is well developed research that it makes economic good sense to invest in children's early years of life to enable children to have the best possible chance of to succeeding at school and further that good educational outcomes are a major factor in overcoming disadvantage.

There is an extensive evidence base that demonstrates that several things will make a big difference to a vulnerable child's thriving and resilience.

- Breastfeeding and strong bonds with significant adults
- Quality childcare for at least two years prior to school
- Strong consistent community ie even if move house, staying with the same community
- Good experience of teachers in the first years of school

There are many programs funded under the Families NSW initiative that assist the likelihood of vulnerable indigenous children to have good educational outcomes. This program must be continued and expanded with greater emphasis on employment of indigenous staff so that children are more likely to access activities.

Funding the recommendations of the 'Breaking the Silence' report.

This Report was well researched and the NSW State government must put resources into funding its implication if it is to be taken seriously in its determination to reduce indigenous disadvantage.

Economic Development / Employment

There are many ways that more employment could be fostered for indigenous people:

Arts projects -with particular focus on public space art such as murals. We have seen the difference that opportunities for exhibition and sales have made to individuals eg through holding annual NAIDOC art exhibitions where locally produced work is sold and also funding local Aboriginal people to run NAIDOC activities. Arts mentoring is important as is promoting Indigenous art through awards at local and state levels.

There is a group of talented Aboriginal Artists that have formed called "The Marra Mob". Two of the artists are recognised and awarded prizes within New South Wales yet they have no permanent space to practice in and no Art Gallery to show their artworks. The Marra Mob have had many successful exhibitions and now are developing products for tourism yet there is still a lack of non financial and financial support in these early developmental stages

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National parks - creating real and permanent employment for indigenous people, also traineeships and TAFE courses that encourage valuing of existing skills and development of new knowledge.

The value of Indigenous knowledge needs to more strongly promoted in National Parks. In the Blue Mountains there are no permanent positions held by Indigenous people. Yet research on overseas tourists show that contact with indigenous people / indigenous culture is highly valued in their travel experience.

Tourism

Initiatives could be developed to train and support Indigenous businesses to employ Indigenous people for cultural education/eco tourism projects.

Echo Point is one of the most visited sites in Australia for tourism and has no place for Aboriginal art/culture sharing and no strategic plan for Indigenous Tourism opportunities. Over 80% of people visiting the Blue Mountains region *expect* Aboriginal representation / interpretation. At this date there is nothing readily available throughout the region, particularly needed in regions where the tourist/ visitor numbers are over millions annually.

Community Cultural Development

Using strengths based practices give communities the opportunities to focus on activities that enable individuals and groups to do things that increase self esteem, visibility and income eg Wollemi Dances - a group of young Aboriginal girls who have been mentored by an older experienced dancers and now perform for payment at community events.

We would be pleased to be invited to speak to the Inquiry.

Yours Faithfully,

Julianne Abood,
Mountains Community resource Network,
On behalf of Blue Mountains Community Interagency
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January 30th 2008.

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