

INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE

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Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage

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Background

The disadvantaged position of the Aboriginal people of Australia is well known and well documented with many attempts to address the issues appearing to have little or limited impact on the life chances of Aboriginal people. We will not attempt here to enlighten you on any of the research and literature available which documents clearly, concisely and loudly about the position of Aboriginal people and the myriad of projects/programs aimed at supporting the development of life chances of Aboriginal people to reach that of non Aboriginal people. Rather what we will do is give you an insight into some of our very grassroots activities that we have undertaken that have assisted and also our insight into what is a complex and multi-faceted problem.

About us:

Spyns Inc is a community based non government organization which has been operating in the Penrith area since 1982 as a community development organization. In 2000 with the blessing of the Aboriginal community it applied for and received funding for an ATSI community development program in the Penrith area. This involved the employment of two Aboriginal workers, one with a family focus and one with a youth focus. Two Aboriginal workers were employed to assist in the support of each other in a non-Aboriginal organization. The organization (its management members and staff members) attended a three day cultural awareness training to support the implementation of the project.

The Penrith Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Neighbourhood Workers Project (PATSI) has grown from strength to strength and now has 7 Aboriginal staff within its team supporting community development and early intervention and prevention. Some people in the Penrith area now have access to ATSI specific programs, activities and casework support. All of these are supported by State government funding (Department of Community Services), about half being programs of a renewable nature.

PATSI is now based in Cranebrook, one of Penrith's highest areas of Aboriginal population, with most families located in DOH properties. However, the PATSI team is funded to work across Penrith and does have a small client base (mainly case management) across the LGA.

Our experience over the past 8 years clearly indicates that “¹good health and nutrition, a safe and comfortable home, a high quality education and the opportunity to share in the dividends of participation in the economy through work” aren't a part of most of the community with which we work.

High levels of community and family dysfunction, conflict and violence continue to pervade the landscape with some families in significant difficulties and well known to child protection authorities and other government departments e.g. Police. Engagement in early education, good health, safety, security and

¹ ALP position paper – New Directions an equal start in life for Indigenous Children

happiness are not part of these families lives and are very difficult to motivate and draw into positive community life and family development because of the longevity of their experience (mostly intergenerational).

Following are two recent examples of the extreme despair we face as workers as we attempt to support and develop our local community and sadly it shows the acceptance by many Aboriginal families and their kids about the inevitability of their life and the cycle of impoverishment firmly cemented in their lives.

Peter (not his real name), a 15 year old Cranebrook lad disengaged from school for many years, due to lack of secure tenancy (continually on the move from Lithgow DOH, to Cranebrook with 6 family members living in one bedroom at their grandparents house, Cranebrook DOH, St.Marys. His parents are ex drug addicts struggling to remain clean, his parents didn't finish school, were/are constantly seeking secure housing therefore never able to move beyond always living in crisis mode and having no further room in their life for goals or seeing the possibility of something different. Very sad and frustrating as a worker to stand by and watch the lights go out in Peter's eyes over a period of 10 months and to know that he is now on the same path as his parents. Peter spent a lot of time up at our Cranebrook Neighbourhood Centre during the day looking for company and found friendship and acceptance. However, we could not continue to support his non attendance at school by making it easy for him to be at the

Centre so we set limits. He was using drugs even though he denied this and would sometimes appear off his face. When our development worker set the scenario that he would end up in Cobham if he didn't watch out, his response was 'I don't mind, I've got lots of friends in there'.

Peter disappeared for a few months but then turned up one day to tell us that he had been in Cobham. Asked how that was he answered "Great, we get a baked dinner every second night". He left home after this due to family conflict and is now "lounge hopping" at people's houses and occasionally staying with relatives. He is now one of the homeless. Without secure housing, poor education, little guidance and no hope, Peter's future is not very promising. No wonder Cobham seems like an okay place to be with friends, a bed and good food.

Ricky (not his real name) a 20yr old long time resident of Cranebrook who has strong connection with our services (we have become his second family) lives in a highly dysfunctional family setting. His comments on a recent stabbing incident on the housing estate is very revealing. When our worker suggested to him that there was too much violence and he should find a nice flat somewhere and move out, his comment was "No way, I love the excitement of the police sirens".

Both of the above examples show the entrenchment of dysfunction as a 'normal' way of living. With no other view of the world, this becomes everyday living. Most Australians would be horrified if their neighbourhoods contained the level of stress, violence and dysfunction that prevail in our housing estate. High levels of distress and trauma have become 'normalised'; a heightened state of anxiety is acceptable and not even acknowledged as present. The numbness and immunity to high levels of stress is almost incomprehensible. The dysfunction feeds itself with residents believing that regular agitation and aggression is normal living. The 'time bombs' inevitably explode with family and community conflict part of regular living.

As workers in the area we must guard ourselves against thinking that this is also normal and that there is very little that we can do about the situation. It is our observation that too many workers have either burnt out because of having to face such a heavy challenge with limited resources or do not fundamentally believe that people can make change in their life given sufficient resources and choices i.e. their understanding of systemic and historic disadvantage is limited. As workers we need to continually question ourselves if we are just managing a bad situation (just managing to keep a lid on the next time bomb) or whether we are really attempting to address and change the situation. With the level of dysfunction and the number of life histories and daily events we hear, we should all be outraged and demand action. But are we? All of us including

governments are party to this disgraceful state of ongoing affairs. We have learnt to distance ourselves from it by degrading, labeling and victim blaming – we have sought the answers in policing, imprisonment and bandaiding.

Professor Tony Vinson,² along with other notable Australians like Professor Fiona Stanley³ has written about this extensively and gives us tangible leads to making changes for the future betterment of Australia's Aboriginal children.

Australia now has an underclass - 'throw away' people who live on housing estates unfortunately contain large numbers of Aboriginal people who have been 'throw away' people for decades; too hard to deal with so inevitably their position in society has become impoverished (finances, spirituality and participation) to such an extent that the level of support needed to change this perspective is high need, consistent, long term and multi faceted and multi-disciplinary.

Aboriginal 'throw away' people are doubly disadvantaged because many of them are not only disconnected from their culture through past policies (Stolen Generations) but also lack a sense of place being at the behest of government housing policies and their own security of tenure. This is particularly true under the recent changes to the NSW Department of Housing where continuity of tenancy is no longer guaranteed. Housing estates unfortunately don't generate a sense of community despite efforts to do so; the idea behind community

² Dropping off the Edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia

³ Children of the Lucky Country

renewal and community development programs has at its heart the essence of what is needed but lacks the courage to plough large amounts of resources into these resource poor areas. This perpetuates the disengagement.

That's the view from us, a small community based community development organization in Penrith who on a daily basis look into the small faces of children who eagerly seek acceptance and friendship, who still have the opportunity for a good life if they receive the level of support and resourcing that every child deserves.

We do have success stories and not all of our residents are in extreme distress but they are starting from a disadvantaged position and therefore require more dedicated and intense resources over a longer period of time. From the above description we do not want to imply that we haven't made any difference in our community, we have.....but the more you see, the more people let you into their lives, the more you know the level of disadvantage that has to be addressed and the harder the solutions become because of the long periods of neglect, the acceptance of neglect, the inevitability of more neglect. Disenfranchised people are the most difficult to support and work with in a developmental and self determining way. They have lost their sense of own responsibility and have become used to the passive handout and this has silenced their voices because governments do not want to hear what it is that needs to be done. The sadness of a system that has turned a resourceful, abundantly resilient people into

passive and ineffectual community members who no longer take pride in accepting responsibility for themselves, their families and their communities is a disgraceful indictment of the dominant white culture. It is a shame that has now afflicted us as a nation and will continue to do so unless we take giant steps to correct the situation. Countries such as New Zealand and Canada have made significant inroad into reducing the level of disadvantage of their First Nation people. Australia has no excuse not to do the same. Let not this Enquiry into Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage be another report where we just wring our hands at the awfulness of what we see and hear – we must find the resources, skills and will to make a fundamental change.

What have we done that is successful?

We are a practical agency – working at the grassroots level providing opportunities for contact, connection and relationship building for local people. Our services are non stigmatized and unbureaucratic so are therefore seen to be approachable by all community members. In particular we have attempted to invite participation by Aboriginal people by the employment of Aboriginal staff and symbols such as a rainbow serpent on the outside of our neighbourhood centre. We look for ways to engage people in activities and programs that are soft entry points and will help them connect to their local community and give them a sense of belonging and opportunities to build their lives in baby steps. The personal relationship between worker and resident is key to this engagement. Examples of simple, non-confrontational connections are:

Breakfast program – 5 days per week each school term. Our purpose is to provide a healthy breakfast for kids to enable them to function better at school; we often need to provide a sandwich for lunch as there is no money in the household or lack of routine and the canteen at the local primary school no longer operates. The regular attendance of the kids gives us an opportunity to keep an eye on how things are in their home and build a rapport of trust so that we become a resilience source for them. Breakfast opens at 7.30am – often there are children waiting for us because their night at home has been horrifying and they are looking for a source of safety. We give them breakfast, a quiet space to rest and a friendly and approachable adult to chat with over breakfast preparation. Trust is developed between kid and worker – a vital connection. The program is run at the neighbourhood centre on a Spyns staff roster with limited support from external agencies. Some parents attend with their kids. Providing breakfast for kids is a bandaid, it's a stop gap measure, it should only be necessary until we as a society tackle the level of disadvantage and dysfunction experienced by these kids.

Koori Cuppa Time – a weekly social group introducing educational type programs on parenting and relationships. This is a soft entry point with the development of trusting relationships between workers and community members, where we can bring skilled workers in to open the doors to learning and becoming cognizant of self needs, self responsibility and family responsibilities.

Aboriginal TAFE Outreach – this was previously a successful program running from the neighbourhood centre. It was a sewing course where we had a large number of participants (full class of 15) attending on a regular basis. We were also able to introduce a Formal Dressmaking course for the girls from Cranebrook High School in years 10 and 12 where they would make their formal dresses. This was very successful, run in school hours with the co-operation of the school and continues on.

The sewing group was unfortunately axed by TAFE as they said they saw no educational or employment outcomes (their core business); However from our point of view we saw regular women attending who were drug users who would attend sober and drug free because of their interest in the group and the rules of the group were that people had to be alcohol and drug free to use the machines. There were large numbers of school clothes made, bedding, women themselves made their own clothes and a great deal of pride was generated as well as good contact with the neighbourhood centre and all the chatter that goes on when people come together; friendships were formed and informal networks were gained. As a TAFE course it was an introduction into an educational system which they would never have thought they could ever attend.

At the same time as the sewing group we had a small one-off grant that we managed to extend to two years for a 'school readiness' program i.e. we offered

childcare to the children of the women attending so that they could concentrate on their sewing uninterrupted. For most Aboriginal families in our area the notion of childcare was new so it provided a good opportunity to discuss children and their needs and for the kids to have an opportunity to interact with other children to build their social skills. It was an educational program where children's progress was monitored and regular interaction with the parents took place. Unfortunately that program ceased due to lack of funding.

Making Tracks School program – a cultural resilience building program for kids 8 and up at the local primary school, it's a weekly program that seeks to support Aboriginal kid's social and academic development, commitment to school attendance. The program also runs at the local High School. Alongside this program is a family program which seeks to engage the parents of the kids who attend the program in their child's education. Depending on the educational experience of the parent, many parents don't find the school approachable or a place they want to be, they don't yet understand the value of education and the impact they will have on their child's life chances. Bringing the parents to the school, taking them on excursions, building a relationship with the worker involved adds to the probability that education will become to be seen as important for their kids.

We have trialed a **transition program for Aboriginal kids** this past year but staffing and funding is a problem. Preschool attendance by Aboriginal kids is an

issue still to be tackled but holds the key to the future educational prospects of these kids. Providing a preschool is not enough; strategies have to be developed to engage parents/carers in the process of valuing education. This is resource intensive, relationship based process fundamental to getting kids to an early educational experience.

Excursions and family days – getting families out of the area where they live and giving them experiences ordinary Australians take for granted. Our usual school holiday excursion sees 100+ people participating in out of area experiences. This gives a frame of reference for things outside of their own neighbourhood experience and an opportunity to see ‘outside’.

What would work better? Our recommendations

Security of funding to keep all of the above PLUS

Micro-community planning – an interagency approach to Aboriginal disadvantage at a micro community level involving all government human service agencies, community organizations, local Council and business. This would better utilize scarce resources and focus services on delivering real changes to particular challenges in each area. It is unfortunate that many departments work in a silo mentality rather than as a multidisciplinary team utilizing the expertise from other human service providers. This is not good use of scarce public dollars

nor does it adequately address complimentary and ancillary services making for a wholistic service. People need to be dealt with as a whole not fragmented off according to a particular need.

Early intervention and prevention – getting to the kids in their early years.

This means intensive services to pregnant women, pre and ante-natal care, particular emphasis on breast feeding and in home parenting support and early childhood education on a universal basis with emphasis on connecting and engaging with those parents most at risk. This can mean investment in considerable time spent connecting and cannot be immediately measured as an outcome. We emphasise again that the most 'at risk' are the most difficult to locate, engage and maintain contact, often because of transience but also because they have left mainstream Australia. There needs to be a system in which families can be tracked across locations/areas to minimize risks of harm to children.

Direct services to children – many programs are targeted at parents and rightly so but there needs to be the acknowledgement that children are often bringing themselves up as well as their siblings. Their experience of life is hard and there are few places of respite for these kids. School becomes another testing ground with poor outcomes because of disengagement leading to truancy and suspension. These kids may have spent the night listening to conflict and violence in their home, over exuberance caused by drug or alcohol misuse by

adults living in the home, mental health actions by adults and overcrowding (they often have to give up their bed for a visiting relative); you need to ask yourself “How can that child perform well at school with lack of sleep, lack of food, anger at their situation, exasperation at their lack of control?” These kids we see daily and they need urgent intervention to help them deal with the situation they find themselves in. Yes, they are probably child protection cases and they would be known to the Department of Community Services but.....they are not acted upon and we need to ask if the removal into an out of home care service is the answer. That is another story that someone more qualified and experienced than us will respond to in this Enquiry.

This is why a multi faceted approach is needed – to address the situation of all of the ages and especially the children who left unattended and uncared for become the Peter mentioned above – they enter the prison pipeline and a probable early death.

One-stop shops in places frequented by Aboriginal people – we must look to taking services to where people attend, where they have a sense of safety and trust and security. With the lack of transport often available to Aboriginal people we must make it as easy as possible to have access to services that non Aboriginal people take for granted. Not only that we need to have specific workers to engage and activate those families who do participate in primary or secondary services. There are many families that must be specifically targeted

to induce to attend. These are specialist strategies that required skill, resourcefulness and determination. However, the availability of outreach health and welfare services in localities accessible to Aboriginal people and trusted by Aboriginal people is sound thinking. Services need to be flexible, to be delivered wherever possible by community based ngos at the community level and address all age from pre-natal to elder health and wellbeing. A wholistic approach to family and community is essential – this requires departments and ngos to work together. We recommend community based services as they are local, approachable, highly flexible and responsive and have accessible avenues for community participation.

Our current experience is that there is a paucity of community based education and information programs available at the local level. There are crisis services (although not enough) but there is little preventative or early intervention work being undertaken in health and education. To give the NSW Department of Community Services their due, they at least have got their heads around the need and subsequent economic benefit for early intervention and dollars have been allocated.

Our experience is that it is not enough to have programs available and then complain when people do not attend – it is the brokering and facilitating of attendance that is the key to success and this is based on trust and relationships with individuals within their own community. There are a number of barriers that

have to be identified first and then actively overcome for the engagement of our most vulnerable and disenfranchised community members. This will be intensive work.

Specialist services in drug and alcohol, mental health and family violence

are in too short supply or non-existent. These need to be fundamental in all communities with Aboriginal populations (as indeed they need to be wherever people's life chances have been diminished through birth or misfortune).

Housing estates have become overcrowded with people who have multiple levels of stress and disadvantage and this compounds the situation. Again Professor Tony Vinson⁴ cites available statistics showing the most disadvantaged communities (there are 69 across Australia) as having very specific socio-medical indicators – limited education, deficient labour market credentials, poor health and disabilities, low income and engagement in crime. Aboriginal people are over-represented in all of these indicators.

Places of healing and healers are required. Aboriginal people often experience trauma on a regular basis; sickness, death, disability, incarceration of loved ones is high and takes its toll on people's psyche as does the historical discrimination that has been inflicted upon the Aboriginal population – their loss of place, culture and pride has diminished their resilience and requires urgent attention. You will recall earlier in this submission about the high anxiety, anticipation and expectation of conflict and agitation. This is all part of a people unable to heal.

⁴ Sydney Morning Herald January 26 "Lost in our own Bermuda Triangle"

Transport makes access more probable – Transport access is a fundamental barrier to the participation of many Aboriginal people into existing support systems. We have a bus funded through Variety, the Children’s Charity – but need funding for a bus driver. It is not good use of our workers’ time to spend it driving people to and from programs. A volunteer program could be utilized but currently we do not have the workforce to support this because volunteer program can be resource and support intensive. Aboriginal people’s ability to access support and programs is limited by their access to transport as most Aboriginal people we are working with do not have their own car. Transporting children on public buses (Aboriginal people have more children than non-Aboriginal people) is often impractical and requires a strong organizational commitment on the part of the parent.

Government commitment to long term, adequate funded and comprehensive programs – too many pilot, one-off programs with no government commitment to funding long term whether successful or not has been the history of this fraught service area. This sets up expectations in the community and when withdrawn or not refunded perpetuates distrust of government and community agencies. A substantial comprehensive investment will need to be made into long-term (intergenerational), resource rich funding across all human resource agencies and organizations to make an improvement in Aboriginal life outcomes. To turn around this level of disadvantage will not

come cheaply. As the success of intervention is relationship based through secure and trusting relationship development, competitive tendering as a government funding procurement process is detrimental because it cuts the ties of existing relationships by possible changing of the service provider. This must be looked at as it already has detrimental affects on communities.

Training and workforce development

Impediments to success can be the quality of the workforce. Recruitment and retention of skilled staff is a major concern of the community services sector. This is even more marked in Aboriginal staff who often move on to a government department job because of the better salaries offered. This has been articulated most clearly in an extensive survey of community sector ngo workers conducted by the Australian Services Union⁵. There is ample evidence to show that to stop the slide from ngo community services sector to public sector, parity of wages is essential.

There is a limited market from which to draw Aboriginal staff. Many Aboriginal staff do not have the same level of education or qualification that non Aboriginal workers have and this can be a problem if the organization does not have a commitment to training and development or the resources to pay for training which can be outrageously expensive. A recent example is a quote for in house tailor made 9 day training to upskill our Aboriginal services team for family

⁵ Australian Services Union – Building Social Inclusion in Australia

support work - \$11,000+ and this was through Burnside's training unit. Another example is the cost of an Indigenous Triple P parenting program

Quality workers are required for quality service provision. Burnout of workers and workers constantly moving on is an impediment to the relationship building and trust necessary for engagement and therefore change. The employment of Aboriginal staff to broker the development of relationships with services and networks is fundamental to engagement and to participate in opportunities that bring life changes. Whilst it is not imperative that only Aboriginal staff work with Aboriginal clients or communities, it is a very helpful first step to engaging Aboriginal people. We have both Aboriginal and non Aboriginal workers working with Aboriginal people and this has worked well and Aboriginal people are now comfortable with approaching our non Aboriginal staff who work in centres seen to be Aboriginal friendly.

We need to be able to retain staff on an ongoing and long term basis because of the importance of relationships established with community members that also carries the history of the community. This requires a strategy around staff retention that allows relationship building and at the same time respite for staff from the 'compassion fatigue' and emotional overload that can transpire working in an impoverished area over a substantial period of time.

Reconciliation

Many non-Aboriginal people are eager to participate and assist in the reparation of our past injustices. They showed their concern and walked in droves across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in search of a different future which contained justice. It all unfortunately came to a standstill but leadership is required urgently at every level of our society to firmly restart that agenda of acknowledgement that we need to come together as a people and that can only happen after a formal apology at a national level. Governments need to assist with local campaigns to raise the community's awareness of us to take responsibility. People are looking for ways to engage in making Australia a reconciled society. Governments can help make that an easier process.

We would end with the words of Professor Tony Vinson – “Get in early, get in often, get in effectively”. Simple powerful statements that if acted upon would make the difference to overcoming future Indigenous disadvantage.

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