

**INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS  
DISADVANTAGE**

**Organisation:** Dubbo Neighbourhood Centre Inc.  
**Name:** Ms Jackie Wright  
**Position:** Senior Manager  
**Telephone:**  
**Date received:** 15/08/2008

---



SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

15 AUG 2008

RECEIVED

Supplementary Submission

For the Standing Committee on Social Issues  
Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage in NSW

Employment, mentoring and training of Aboriginal people:

As reported in our previous submission the Dubbo Community Development Project with Dubbo Neighbourhood Centre has been operating from the Gordon Centre in the Gordon Estate since September 2006. It is scheduled for "winding up" in June 2009.

We commenced with a team of 6 part time Activities Workers and a full time Coordinator and a number of casuals who had been long term CDEP participants. In a couple of instances people had not been in paid work before. Ages ranged from 20 years (2) to 42 years. We now span ages from 22 to 60 years.

As we progressed we had weekly team meetings that provided peer support and challenges, opportunities to develop strategies to address the complex needs of families, children and young people, and training and development. Attendance and participation has always been reliable and enthusiastic. This element of work, including up to 15 team members has supported the development of a commitment to quality work and peer support/mentoring.

Issues that have and continue to be addressed explicitly with the team include; reliability, violence and criminality, use of drugs and alcohol, roles of men and women in the team and in the community, racism, reverse racism, good enoughness vs excellence, ethics, and so it goes. Whatever emerges that impacts on the workplace is put on the table and discussed: problems; causes; possible solutions.

Team members consistently report that this style of working has been critical to the teams' survival and development in a complex environment. Those having joined the team later have also embraced this way of working as being successful in surviving and improving in a tough working environment.

One staff member was terminated during their probationary period, having been supported into a position better suited to their skills; one moved into a full time position with the AES on better pay; one was dismissed for aggressive conduct in the workplace, another 2 have secured work in mainstream positions – one as

a child care worker and the other as a child youth and family worker. Future employment prospects for the remaining staff are very positive.

A number of mentoring offers were made by staff in the job networks and other agencies. They did not prove useful as they were not sufficiently informed re the strengths and weaknesses nor consistent enough to be effective. The most effective support has developed within the team over time.

We had a STEP contract for the permanent staff that enabled additional training opportunities. Each relevant staff member commenced a Community Services Youth Work Traineeship that should be completed by December 2008 via TAFE who have provided excellent support for the team.

This style of development requires a respectful, clear and robust style of leadership and offers many challenges along the way. The results however, are clear and observable.

### Summary

1. We need to develop a team approach to both support and challenge peers to perform at a high level;
2. Time and energy must be directed to addressing challenges as they emerge;
3. People should not be retained having been offered all reasonable opportunities to succeed in the workplace without performing to a reasonable standard;
4. Some staff will respond and develop rapidly and consistently, others will take longer and others will not make it.
5. Low self esteem limits people's willingness to apply and/or succeed in mainstream positions – this takes time and successful endeavours to achieve.

### Measuring Outcomes:

This is critical but practically limited in Indigenous projects and (particularly) by smaller services by the lack of funds to pay recognized or credible evaluators to provide comprehensive and objective evaluations.

Where, as in our situation, demonstrable and significant change is effected, we would almost inevitably fall prey to accusations of being invested in reporting positive outcomes and lack of objectivity. Efforts to engage stakeholders in longer term benchmarking or independent evaluations were unsuccessful.

Many argue that it is difficult to determine measurable outcomes etc for social interventions. I challenge this view. If we have a starting scenario recorded, a number of outcomes are readily measurable eg attendance levels at school;

participation in community/positive social activities; non/less offending or less serious offences, remaining out of custody, improved health etc.

Summary:

1. Measuring outcomes is possible but requires dedicated funding to support credible evaluations.

Funding:

The lack of recurrent or longer term funded programs that facilitate community interaction, rather than a particular niche of service, continues to be a major barrier to establishing and maintaining protective relationships with adults and peers for families and children at highest risk of poor health and life outcomes. Adequately resourced “places” are important for Aboriginal people.

It is my belief that wider recognition of the harm done to Indigenous communities in NSW by the European settlement is required. The languages were comprehensively quashed, people’s connection to land was more extensively damaged and proportionally more families were harmed by the early government policies of assimilation and genocide.

It appears to me that there need to be more programs developed with communities that allow incremental change over time, rather a short term expectation for massively improved capacity in seriously disempowered communities. Clearly, some individuals may develop rapidly and we should celebrate and support such people. It is not reasonable to expect a major shift in entrenched attitudes and behaviours in a one year pilot or a three year project.

Funding should be based on quantifiable need, be community based where possible and have goals determined by the community and services in partnership. Funding must have room for flexibility to respond to emerging needs or greater understanding and be long term enough to both attract, develop and retain the best staff possible.

To adequately develop and maintain services that will support desired outcomes in complex communities, reasonable infrastructure must be available in relevant places. Partnerships should also be explored to support genuine capacity building over time.

Objective and fair evaluation processes will provide more reliable information about the value and successes of programs and services to inform future funding priorities. Some services that do not yet exist will require recurrent funding.

Part of the capacity building ventures may include successful programs being linked to business partners/corporates to develop income streams other than government funding.

Summary:

2. The complexity of the work needs to be reflected in the funding amounts and duration;
3. Funding should be community based where possible;
4. Infrastructure funding must be available to support the work;
5. Successful services should be linked with means of developing income streams other than government departments where possible.

**Partnerships in Service Delivery:**

Much more attention has been given to this than is evident in much of the practice on the ground. There will always be examples of better than average practice. There appear to be some structural barriers that limit partnerships from developing to be as effective as they could potentially be eg competitive funding tenders; incomplete understanding between sectors about how to work effectively together without compromising critical values and/or principles of relevant stakeholders. Strict compliance requirements tend to prevent the development of innovative thinking and opportunities, and funding limitations that keep objectives unreasonably limited.

The examples, of which there are many, of entrenched, multi-generational dependence on welfare, limited education, drug and alcohol dependence, physical and sexual violence clearly require a multi-partner approach that I have not seen working effectively in my spheres of experience to date.

For example, it is well recognized that child sex offenders often offend against multiple children, often over an extended period of time. Many people in the community, in DoCS, health and police know who they are. And yet, we fail to intervene to protect children other than those who are willing and able to give evidence in a traumatizing process in a legal jurisdiction. Other children known to be at risk due to proximity and/or relationship, if not being currently and demonstrably abused are currently not protected. Civil liberties of offenders notwithstanding, can we not change policy/legislation to do better?

We have frequent examples of racism against Aboriginal people in the current tight rental conditions. Real Estate Agents are entrusted with securing "the best tenants" for property owners. This appears to result in frequent decisions against Aboriginal people. Perhaps some type of service partnership may increase

Indigenous representation in the real estate sector that may in time reduce the impact of implicit and/or explicit racism?

And what of the families who are genuinely risky or demonstrably poor tenants? Do we officially sanction such families being homeless and at risk of harm or incarceration? Who bears responsibility for these, usually complex needs adults and their highly at risk children? It is my belief that if a range of statutory and non-statutory bodies partner to address the extensive needs of those at most risk we can make a significant difference. Surely we must try.

#### Summary:

1. Partnerships are talked about more than they are deliberately realized and worked towards.
2. People at the highest level of disadvantage and need require and deserve a functioning system of partnerships to increase the effectiveness of interventions.

#### Education:

Much has been made of the importance of education and this clearly needs to continue. An issue that has become very relevant in our work is the exclusion of children and young people from education via formal and informal means, often because of violence learned in the homes and community and articulated in school environments. If we are to reduce the risk of another generation of young people being incarcerated and condemned to unemployment or low skilled jobs, we must limit the exclusion of children due to learned behaviours.

Our project has recently been supporting a 14 year old girl to return to school, by accompanying her to classes and in the playground until the risk that she poses in the school community is assessed as being reasonable. The concern is completely understandable. The process for re-engagement is not. When I asked the Deputy Principal this week why she could not be supported by existing school staff I was advised that unless there is a diagnosed condition resources could not be allocated. We have managed a partnership with the school that appears to be paying off, but the cost to our funded program is prohibitive, when many other children require a similar intervention.

I understand that schools are expected to provide many things to many children, but it appears to us that there needs to be a program available that teaches high risk children and young people alternative responses to frustration and authoritative challenges than violence and aggression. This may take place in or out of the school but needs to include education staff to ensure that skills learned are transported into the school environment.

### Summary:

1. A significant number of children and young people are being excluded from school environments due to violent and aggressive behaviour that is learned. Adequate resources are not being allocated to help reintegrate them following exclusions/suspensions.
2. Programs are required that specifically target violence and aggression as a core response to frustration and anger.

### Services for Men:

There is a serious lack of services that support men who are at risk of harming themselves and others or who have committed offenses against women and children in the community. There are no longer any "Proclaimed Places" in or around Dubbo to my knowledge and those that did exist were often not accessible as they were located within general SAAP services and posed risks to other residents. There are many reports of men feeling trapped and unable to leave a volatile situation, due to a lack of alternatives, that may end in violence. It appears that services for men are few in number as people are more likely to concentrate on the impact of violence on women and that they do not know how to resolve complex male issues effectively. There is also a strong shame factor for young and older men who are victims of violence themselves, with no clear places to go for support.

It has been suggested that having people in the community for such people to contact in times of risk or stress may be an effective strategy to explore. This concept is compatible with the concept developed by Maureen Thornhill and skilling up interested community members to support people with D & A issues.

### Summary:

1. Complex issues for men are insufficiently understood for successful resolution;
2. The absence of support services for men with established violence or risk of violence greatly increases risk to both men, women and children.

### Specific Strategies:

1. Much of the harm in the community is imposed upon and furthered by a relatively small number of seriously hurt people. Strategies to address the hurt and harm imposed on these families by the system in the past and by each other in the present must be explored and developed. There needs to be family and a community approach respectively.

2. Much harm is being done by men with drug and alcohol issues. Many children are learning the same strategies to deal with life. There are serious gaps in service options for boys between the ages of 8 and 12 in our community. Programs that explore ways to improve the self esteem and skills of the men, who can in turn support the development of boys are urgently required. A proposed model is attached.
3. Women who have been victims of a range of abuses often become drug and alcohol dependent and fail to protect and provide for their children. Much conflict is perpetuated by families in conflict with each other and other families and impacts very directly on their children, who are encouraged or at times compelled to continue to fights with other young people, to “support” their families. Programs that have a focus on healing and empowerment and targeted support as determined by the families are required. A proposed model has been developed and is attached for your information. Another model has recently been approved with some of these principles by DOHA in Coonamble.
4. Places to gather and develop relationships are required in communities. They must be adequately resourced and be open late and on weekends for young people. Such services offer a springboard into many other services and activities that may assist young people to make healthy lifestyle choices. We are currently working on a service to replace the Gordon Centre when it closes in June 2009.
5. Programs that develop understanding and build relationships between those in control of important resources eg housing should be developed to reduce the impact of racism and implicit prejudice.
6. Programs addressing drug and alcohol issues must be developed in partnership with community members as the ongoing problem in recruiting D&A staff by Health is not likely to be resolved in the near future. A model for undertaking a project of this type is being developed for Dubbo by Maureen Thornhill of the Dubbo Division of General Practice.
7. Very importantly, meaningful work must be supported for the unemployed remaining outside of the labor market. Strategies should involve teams rather than individuals as a general rule as a starting point to develop people’s confidence in their own abilities and to compete for mainstream positions in time. Our model of the past 2 years has something to offer by way of example.

Thank you for considering this submission and I would be happy to discuss any of the proposed strategies further if they seem relevant to making a difference.

Jackie Wright  
Senior Manager  
Dubbo NC