

INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE

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Overcoming Aboriginal Disadvantage

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We are a regional organisation that provides support to community organisations across Inner and Eastern Sydney. We resource forums, interagencies and planning meetings. We interact with government departments and advocate for local issues. Because of this role, we are in a position to know the achievements and constraints of local community service providers.

Delivering Services on the ground

We are addressing in this paper, one issue that impacts on 'Closing the Gap', which is often not recognised by government. **We will be discussing what community organisations and local workers need to successfully deliver services to Aboriginal people on the ground.**

In developing services for Aboriginal people to deal with needs that require attention, there are a lot of steps. Most of the attention in getting services operating successfully is initially to do with government roles, such as;

- advocating to government to get a need recognised and accepted
- getting funds assigned by Treasury
- allocating the program to the appropriate government department
- designing the model of service
- organising the correct tendering
- setting budgets, outputs and accountability mechanisms.

Insufficient attention is given up front, to what will make the service a success for the people who deliver and most importantly, receive the service.

The point at which the service is delivered to Aboriginal people, whether it is by a government department, a large or a small community organisation or church, is a key place where the success of intentioned initiatives is determined.

Our experience is that the point where services are delivered to people on the ground gets little attention from government in the original design of the program. There is also little capacity to find solutions where there are problems in implementation and make changes to the program. Yet this is the one vital point where the whole program can succeed or fail.

Some issues that need addressing to achieve the best possible delivery of services to people in their communities are listed below. They have been derived from reports of workers, both Aboriginal and those who work with Aboriginal people at community meetings in Inner Sydney.

1. Consideration of the local context by government departments when designing programs

'Writing unimplementable policies'

Policy writers in government departments who are implementing a new program (or redesigning an existing one) can produce an impressive document that ticks all the 'writing good public policy' boxes. They include as a major aspect of the project, actions that will address the government Department's core directions, strategies and current plans. Too often these policies and programs are written by policy officers who have little or no 'on the ground' experience. When it comes to putting these projects into operation, Department priorities often do not support or can work against good implementation. Increasingly, details of inputs, outputs and outcomes and accountability are set into the project up front, offering little room for flexibility in development of new strategies when the project reaches the implementation stage on the ground. This does not mean service providers are reluctant to be accountable, but that restrictive outputs can prevent the capacity to respond to needs in the community.

We recommend that policy writers have front line experience in or are in contact with service deliverers so the needs of service providers are considered, as well as needs of the funding body, when designing new programs.

2. Seeking and integrating feedback from service providers in a continuous process

'Don't confuse me with facts, my mind is made up'

The need for meaningful consultation between government funders and service providers is still recognised by both parties as an essential element in 'getting it right'. We note that the new Federal Government is implementing large scale and intensive consultation to find out how to make its interventions work. Up until this point, consultation with communities and local service providers has increasingly become tokenistic. Most so called 'consultation, is in fact information provision, with most of the session taken up with powerpoint presentations that too often consists of defense of government decisions made in house and promotion for the government department. The funding departments response to issues raised by people from the service provision level is too often to ignore, trivialise or attack the input. And probably more worrying, many government department officials have no idea what we are talking about. Those who do, often tell us they understand, but have no capacity to impact on internal department workings.

Also disappearing from the program implementation scene, is meaningful feedback. Government advisory groups are increasingly becoming disempowered, with people being placed on Ministerial Advisory Committee who will agree with the department's line.

We recommend that meaningful consultation be conducted by government departments in the formulation of government policy, the development of new programs and the implementation of those programs.

We recommend that if consultation with service providers identifies a problem that is getting in the way of providing a good service, the government officials take notice, respect the advice and work with the providers to solve the problem.

3. Not requiring service providers to mirror government departments in their size, operations and actions.

"Why do we have to be the same as a government department?"

At present the NSW government has a strategy and a practice of funding community organisations that are large, corporatised or bureaucratised, instead of small local services. It is assumed that a large service will provide a better service. Certainly many processes that cluster around service provision, such as tendering, promotion of the organisation, sophisticated budget and specialised management are better done by large organisations. It is not whether these large organisations actually deliver better local services. Some will do well and some will not, but the problem is, how does government know? The current way services are monitored, sees the emphasis on checking the organisations policies and procedures, OH&S, recruitment procedures etc. Checking how the service actually operates as it delivers a service would provide more insight into what is working and what is not. There is also a growing trend for large organisations to subcontract small organisations with good 'on the ground' contacts to actually deliver the service, while retaining their administration funding. Government also saves on its administration costs by dealing with fewer organisations that are more like them.

Where it is considered that community organisations will not deliver services in a sufficiently autocratic way, government services are sent to do the job. The fact that government departments are essentially inflexible, bureaucratic and their procedures daunting to Aboriginal workers and Aboriginal service recipients has proven no disincentive.

Small organisations have the added value of involving more directly, local Aboriginal workers, management committees, service recipients and community members, allowing direct feedback and capacity to make changes that create a responsive service provision.

We recommend that government assess the value of large service providers by checking how well they deliver services on the ground. Compare the success of smaller

organisations in that aspect and fund accordingly, not on the basis of which organisations behave like government departments.

4. More workers on the ground

“Service provision is about relationships between people”

Another growing trend of human service provision in NSW government departments is provision of services through indirect means - IT services or call centres. **What is needed in all cases are additional worker hours on the ground and this is especially the case with Aboriginal services.** The success of service provision on the ground is based on forming positive relationship with other human beings, not a computer or a call centre operator. Many people needing support will not engage with a service unless a gradual process of trust building is put in place. Many people's needs are complex and interconnected and need time to unravel and find solutions. At times fixing one problem can provide progress with other problems.

If we only see people only as a health 'patient' or a housing 'tenant' or a bus 'passenger' or a prison 'inmate' then this interconnectedness of problem solving is lost. It is not as neat for government funding silos, but it works in human terms. This approach is even more necessary for Aboriginal services, where interaction with another person who is trusted and understands is vital. Many Aboriginal workers and services report that they are required by the people using their services to deal with their problems in a holistic way. Yet the trend by government in funding is in the opposite direction to less 'hands on', more electronic, more specialised, more streamlined service provision. Government wrongly believes this is less costly. It is more costly as it does not help people to recover or improve and they end up needing increasingly more costly interventions.

We recommend that government puts a high priority on increasing the number of workers in Aboriginal services on the ground working directly and holistically with the individual. These workers can then link Aboriginal Service recipients into specialist services.

5. Providing support to Aboriginal workers on the ground

“How much can one worker do?”

Workforce issues for Aboriginal workers need attention. Aboriginal workers are under a lot of additional pressures due to the additional complications and needs experienced by Aboriginal service users and Aboriginal communities. Some of these include the isolation of Aboriginal people from mainstream society, the requirement that Aboriginal workers take on the full range of needs of Aboriginal clients and their families, the level of skills required by Aboriginal workers and the complex accountability and policy requirements of government funded services.

The level of staffing of Aboriginal services needs to be generous. As well as the designated worker that would normally be attached to a program, there needs to be additional support workers. These additional workers need to build connections between the Aboriginal individuals, communities and support services in a broad way. They could take the role of field workers who can be able to work in a fairly unconstructed way to an outreach unit. These workers would need knowledge of the services in the area, so they are able to liaise with service providers with referrals, but unattached to specific program outputs. For example, Aboriginal Home Care Staff report that they are often asked to help with filling out forms for unrelated services and for help in following through when the forms are processed. This work is not part of their Home Care guidelines, but they are unable to conduct their Home Care activities while their client is worried about a pressing form from another government department. The other type of worker that needs to be increased for Aboriginal services is case managers for Aboriginal people with complex needs.

There is also a strong need for development workers to identify issues that are causing problems and to advocate to government to have these problems addressed. Two other important roles are to link Aboriginal services to each other and to help them keep informed about government changes and requirements. There is also a strong requirement on Aboriginal services to represent Aboriginal issues at a wide range of meetings both locally such as interagencies and at regional and state level forums. Where there are only direct service providers to carry out this role, the workers are too busy to attend or are unsure of their role, raising the prospect of tokenistic representation that does not make the Aboriginal worker feel valued and effective.

There is considerable churn in Aboriginal service provider positions. Frequently, Aboriginal positions remain unfilled for a long time, putting stress on remaining Aboriginal workers who then leave due to the unrealistic workload. Those development workers that are employed are often pressed into direct service provision.

We recommend that the level of staffing of Aboriginal services needs to be generous to allow for adequate flexibility, support, training and professional development.

6. Aboriginal services need to be allowed to be flexible.

"Responding to Aboriginal needs means being flexible"

There is often rhetoric about flexibility for Aboriginal services, but it can be hard to achieve. Some flexible arrangements that are needed to provide effective outcomes for Aboriginal services are seen by government departments as poor standards of service provision or poor accountability. Aboriginal culture and local relationships between people and groups impact strongly on what is

possible in Aboriginal service provision. All Aboriginal services and workers need to be able to adjust to take the local Aboriginal culture and issues into account. This is the job of government department monitoring mechanisms as well as other service providers who interact with Aboriginal services. Management of Aboriginal services by Aboriginal people is seen as a necessity, yet both governance and management are increasing in complexity and no consideration is given to the capacity of Aboriginal people to meet those requirements or additional resources provided to assist.

We recommend that Aboriginal services are allowed as much flexibility as possible in accommodating Aboriginal culture and practices in service provision.

7. Identification of issues for mainstream services in delivering services to Aboriginal people.

There are already a group of community and government services that provide support to Aboriginal people in the Inner Sydney Area. There is often criticism of community services that their services do enough to provide access to their services by Aboriginal people. At the same time, local Aboriginal people will tell us quite definitely that they prefer to use services provided by Aboriginal people. There needs to be a study of the amount of traveling undertaken by Aboriginal people from other areas to use Aboriginal specific services, especially in Redfern. Respecting this preference would see more Aboriginal specific services provided, especially to case manage complex service needs.

Given the above, there is support that can be provided to mainstream services to make them more accessible to Aboriginal people. Most services in areas where there is a sizeable Aboriginal population are aware of the need to have culturally appropriate policies, procedures and service delivery. They can be assisted with specific training about how Aboriginal culture impacts on service provision in their locality and ways to interact with local Aboriginal people, including meeting local Aboriginal Elders. It would be beneficial for mainstream organisations not only do training but also work with Aboriginal organisations (on the job training) and to increase the number of Aboriginal people working in mainstream services.

The barrier to doing the additional work needed to make mainstream services more accessible to Aboriginal people is that government tends to under resource community services, require increasing targeting and monitoring and conduct an ongoing regime of restructuring. At present, most services are full and services cannot do more without extra funds.

We recommend that we respect the stated wish of Aboriginal people to be able to access Aboriginal specific services and that adequate Aboriginal services are funded. Mainstream services should be assisted by appropriate training and contact with local Aboriginal services to assist them to provide access when wanted by Aboriginal people.

