

## INQUIRY INTO YOUTH JUSTICE

**Organisation:** Dharrivaa Elders Group and Yuwaya Ngarra-li Partnership

**Date Received:** 13 March 2026

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# Yuwaya Ngarra-li Partnership between the Dharriwaa Elders Group and UNSW

13 March 2026

Dear Committee Secretary,

## **Submission: Select Committee Inquiry into youth justice**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to this important inquiry.

Yuwaya Ngarra-li (YN) is the long-term community-led partnership between the Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG) and the University of New South Wales (UNSW).

Our submission has a specific focus on the following Terms of Reference:

- b) the availability, effectiveness, and evaluation of evidence-based and community-led responses that prevent offending and reoffending
- c) the specific and disproportionate impact of the youth justice system on Aboriginal children
- d) alternative youth justice models and frameworks
- e) the collection, use, and transparency of data

Our submission will provide insights and outcomes from a holistic community-led model of youth diversion focused on reducing the criminalisation and improving the positive life pathways of Aboriginal children and young people that we have been developing in Walgett in remote north-west NSW.

The DEG with its YN partnership colleagues from UNSW would like to give evidence at a hearing.

Background information about the DEG and the history and aims of the YN partnership and the alignment with the Social Determinants of Justice are in Appendix A.

## **Our Work on Youth Justice – 2018-2023**

The DEG identified reducing Aboriginal young people's contact with police and the youth justice system as an urgent priority early in their partnership with UNSW. Their vision is that:

*"Aboriginal children and young people in Walgett can learn, work, be safe, supported and thrive within a robust sense of belonging to their families, community, culture and Country."*

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The DEG have seen that traditional criminal justice responses to issues of personal and public safety do not contribute to actual or perceived safety, and in fact make things worse. These processes criminalise young people at earlier and earlier stages of their life.

The DEG have long called for mechanisms that require police to work cooperatively with community-controlled organisations, taking the lead from community about initiatives that will achieve positive outcomes for community and not make things worse. A long-running concern of the DEG has been the high number of police officers in Walgett, as well as the response to problems faced by residents, such as homelessness, food insecurity, mental health and alcohol and other drug crises being led by the criminal justice system rather than other alternatives such as the health system or community organisations.

In March 2018, YN held a [Youth Justice Forum](#) in Walgett to address problems faced by Aboriginal children and young people in contact with the criminal justice system. In the Youth Justice Forum in 2018, we heard from parents and community workers about the barriers experienced by children and young people that impacts on their wellbeing, for example, housing stress and over-crowding:

*I see that as our teenagers grow up, the houses are full, they haven't got their own space. I see that there is a lot of need for our kids, I see that the kids are really crying out for help. There's not many services in town to get that help, and if there is services, they'll do it for one week, and then the next couple of weeks or a month, they don't worry about these kids, and then they've fallen back down again into that stage one. (Trish Sharpley, Walgett Youth Justice Forum, 2018, p. 5)*

Also at the Forum, we heard from young people about the experience of the police presence in their community during childhood:

*Growing up Aboriginal means it is pretty much inevitable that you will come under police scrutiny at some time in your life, whether you are actually in trouble, assisting them with an inquiry or seeking support yourself. (Walgett Youth Justice Forum, 2018, p. 6)*

Ideas for local evidence-based strategies to address the problems identified at the Forum were developed into an [Action Plan for Children and Young People](#) through collaboration with Aboriginal children and young people, key stakeholders and agency representatives, which set out the goals of:

1. Aboriginal organisations, government agencies, service providers, UNSW and other partners have made clear and funded commitments as part of a long-term plan agreed with the community to improve education, health, housing and employment outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people in Walgett.

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2. Young people in Walgett report higher rates of belonging, safety, support, confidence and wellbeing.
3. Less than 10% of Aboriginal children and young people aged 10-17 from Walgett are appearing in the Children's Court (excluding appearances related to diversion).
4. Visible progress in the engagement of children and young people in study and work including through improvements in school attendance and outcomes, and new work opportunities for Aboriginal young people.

### **Baulaarr Bagay Warruwi Burranba-li-gu: Two River Pathway to Change model**

Since 2018, DEG has been working directly with children and young people as well as families and relevant government agencies, developing our model of youth diversion: Baulaarr Bagay Warruwi Burranba-li-gu (Gamilaraay) "Two River Pathway to Change". The model has three interlinked strategies:

1. Influencing practices and services to support better outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people
2. Supporting engagement and leadership by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), parents and carers
3. Working intensively with Aboriginal children and young people in Walgett to improve their wellbeing and reduce contact with the criminal justice system

We have written about what we have learned through this in our Policy Paper - [Lessons from the Two River Pathway to Change Diversion Model 2018–2023](#).

The Two River Pathway to Change model was selected to feature as an alternative youth justice model in the [supplementary report](#) to the 2024 *Help Way Earlier!* Report published by the Australian Human Rights Commission. This report, *Evidence-based approaches to child justice* featured only two Australian models for alternative youth justice approaches. The model's selection was due to our centring of ACCOs and the community-led approach prioritising self-determination and cultural and community knowledge.

Through implementing the [Two River Pathway to Change model](#), we have learnt a significant amount about the experiences and needs of the cohort of Aboriginal children and young people in contact with the criminal justice system in Walgett, the significant

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stressors and punitive responses they experience and lack of access to safe, holistic and trauma-informed support. In summary:

- Children and young people in Walgett are over-policed and under serviced
- The cohort experiences complex mental health issues, stemming from intergenerational trauma, overcrowded housing and lack of access to appropriate services
- Urgent and critical mental health and wellbeing supports are needed for young people including long-term counselling and assistance in accessing existing services
- Many young people are excluded from education through long and successive suspensions and flawed return-to-school processes
- Wellbeing checks conducted by DEG were effective in early intervention and building trust
- The model emphasises the need to address broader conditions for children and young people's wellbeing, beyond changes in the justice system
- Areas requiring significant shifts to support children and young people include trauma-informed education, access to mental health care and youth services that build trusting relationships

From 2020 to 2022, DEG undertook wellbeing checks with young people - including as part of its crisis response during COVID—building trust and connection and getting to know the support needs of young people as well as dropping off food vouchers, water, activity supplies, PPE, helping young people under youth justice supervision manage their reporting requirements and participation in YJC, and assisting with school packs and access to technology. In 2022, around nine wellbeing checks were completed per month and often acted as early intervention for emerging issues. This model of outreach support was very effective but is not the approach taken by other services in Walgett or the region with responsibilities for children and young people in Walgett.

These insights reinforce a core aspect of the Baulaarr Bagay Warruwi Burranba-li-gu model - that addressing the criminalisation of young people cannot just focus on changes to the justice system; it must focus on broader conditions for children and young people's wellbeing. While policing practice must change, there are many other areas that require significant shifts to support children and young people including trauma-informed education, access to flexible learning and education, access to appropriate trauma-informed mental health care, and youth services and support that

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build trusting relationships and recognise the inherent protective factors of family, Community, ACCOs and Culture.

### **Galuma-li and the Walgett Youth Wellbeing Service - our model of holistic Aboriginal community care in Walgett – 2024-present**

As described in the supplementary report to *Help Way Earlier!* the Two River Pathway to Change model has evolved over time. The DEG has implemented different approaches to both respond to emerging needs, such as coordinating responses for children and young people at a community level during COVID, as well as longer term solutions which require deep and ongoing relationship building between stakeholders in Walgett and across the state. The model allows for mechanisms and initiatives to be practiced and refined over time, enabling collective efforts to grow and build towards longer-term change.

The design of the current Walgett Youth Wellbeing Service (YWS), developed as part of the Two River Pathway to Change model, is informed by years of DEG-led community consultation and collaboration with stakeholders in Walgett. The YWS works with Aboriginal children and young people in Walgett aged 7-17 in contact, or at risk of contact, with the criminal justice system. The YWS is based at a new DEG site, Galuma-li ('care for' in Gamilaraay)<sup>1</sup>. The staff working in the service aim to improve the sense of belonging, safety, support and wellbeing of children and young people through the activities of the YWS.

Through building connection and belonging for these cohorts of young people through delivery of 'community care' models of support, the YWS can shift the dial from interventions that make things worse to solutions that can go to the heart of what's causing the problems – loss, grief, and young people not getting their supports when they need them.

This means punitive and 'tough on young people' approaches won't be the go-to solution anymore – they don't work in our community. It means building and improving pathways to specialist care options and community care options at a local level.

Our long-term goal is that Aboriginal children and young people in Walgett feel safe, valued, and that they belong. Feeling safety, valued and belonging are protective factors

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<sup>1</sup> Devastatingly, the Galuma-li building was gutted by an electrical fire in December 2025. The DEG have continued to provide their programs and services by using other venues in Walgett in 2026.

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which the research and evidence tell us that, over time, help the community to respond and care for Walgett's children and young people before they get to crisis point. For example, when children and young people are in crisis or experiencing challenges, the YWS is a non-punitive 'community care' option for them to rely on for support. We need to make sure that children and young people and their families in Walgett have access to culturally safe services which support their social and emotional wellbeing and promote healing.

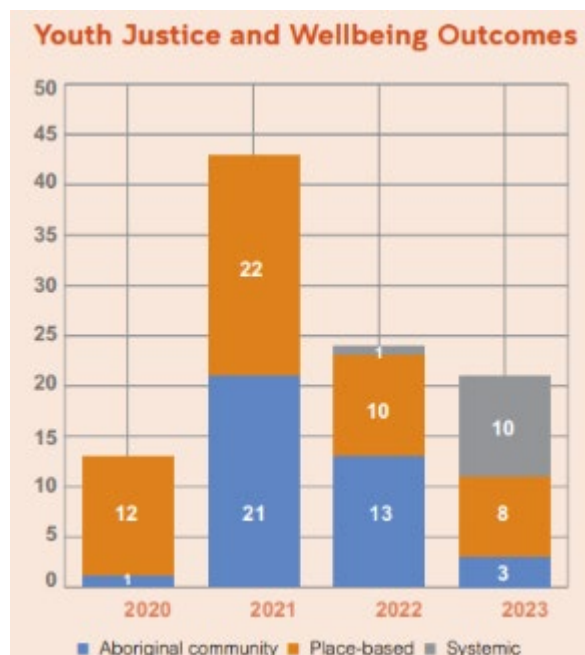
Government funding is currently being sought to deliver the full YWS, which includes initiatives under each of the three interlinked strategies of the Two River Pathway to Change model. However, none of our applications for NSW and Commonwealth government funding have been successful as at writing this submission. We have extensive plans for increasing engagement with new cohorts and embedding and refining activities and we have more activities ready-to-go, under strategy 3 of the Two Pathway Model (working intensively with Aboriginal children and young people). Further resources would also support planned initiatives under the other interlinked strategies: engagement and leadership by ACCOs and parents/carers (strategy 1) and carry out the sustained work needed to influence practices and services and improve outcomes for children and young people (strategy 2).

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### Galuma-li and Walgett Youth Wellbeing Service – Activities and Impact to date

The [Yuwaya Ngarra-li Evaluation and Learning Report 2020-2023](#) summarises outcomes and lessons that includes contribution to 101 outcomes by the Two River Pathway to Change model such as a:

1. Significant decrease of Walgett Aboriginal children and young people appearing in the local Children’s Court - the KPI of less than 10% of Aboriginal children & young people appearing in the Children’s Court was exceeded, with the most recent available data indicating it to be 7.8%
2. Direct assistance to 144 Aboriginal community members around criminal justice-related matters,
3. Intensive support of 17 young people.



With existing funding, from December 2024 to December 2025, the YWS delivered group-based recreational and educational activities for children and young people in Walgett involving:

- 382 attendances by young people
- 26 attendances by adults
- 36 attendances by accompanying children under 9 years

Activities have included painting, dance workshop with NAISDA Dance College, building frog habitats with DEG River Rangers, identifying native vegetation facilitated by a local Elder, pool day, cooking with native ingredients, weaving, candle making and eco-dying with the DEG River Rangers and an Elder.

Galuma-li has hosted 10 community and education sessions for Elders, parents, carers and other community members with 179 attendances including health, cooking, voting and legal workshops.

Feedback has been extremely positive, with young people describing their positive experiences:

- 2 hours is too short
- Want to stay until 7pm

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- Want to come every day

Families trust the YWS and value its impact on wellbeing, learning, and cultural connection, demonstrating that it addresses local needs. Community members have said:

- It's good at Galuma-li, the staff interact with the kids
- Keeps kids off the streets, kids are in a safe place
- Opportunity to go and do other things other than being at home on Xbox and play station
- Offer great activities
- Staff is great, always involved

Galuma-li has also hosted:

- 16 Women's Group sessions (commenced May 2025) with 121 attendances by local women aged from teens to 70s (and 11 attendances by accompanying children).
- 12 Men's Group sessions (commenced Sept 2025) with 55 attendances by local men aged from 20s-60s.

Galuma-li has also provided 909 meals through programs and events.

Despite this successful model and the resounding positive feedback from both young people and the wider community, resourcing these services has been a significant challenge for the DEG and no funds have been secured to implement the full YWS model (as discussed above).

### **Why is it so hard for ACCOs to get government funding to work holistically with our children to close the gap?**

Despite the clear evidence of impact, we have not been able to secure government funding to grow our YWS in Walgett. This is disappointing due to 26 years of operation and many years working to improve outcomes for our children and young people in collaboration with other local ACCOs and government agencies and clear alignment with Closing the Gap targets.

As the supplementary report to Help Way Earlier! States:

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*ACCOs play a vital role in fostering sustainable and culturally safe responses to child offending through place-based initiatives. By grounding initiatives within the values, knowledge, and priorities of First Peoples communities, ACCOs not only enhance the relevance and effectiveness of interventions but also empower community members to take ownership of their own community-building efforts. Their holistic approach, which integrates cultural connectedness, social support, and each community's context, is essential for addressing the root causes of offending by children and promoting long-term positive outcomes. Recognising and strengthening the capacity of ACCOs is fundamental to creating equitable, effective, and respectful justice and therapeutic strategies that truly serve First Peoples children and young people and their communities.*

We have recently applied unsuccessfully for a number of government grants to support the YWS. Significant time, resources and cultural costs were wasted alongside the community costs of taking staff members away from family and community commitments to work on these applications. Resources are already stretched thin in ACCOs, with staff working across multiple programs because we are so passionate about our community. This continues to be a struggle despite the success of the programs and the desire for services that would fulfill the Closing the Gap targets and their Priority Reforms (particularly Priority 2 'Building the Community Controlled Sector').

Despite this, the DEG has struggled to get any financial support from the NSW or Commonwealth governments despite its significant track record as a long-standing ACCO and its evidence-base for success in place-based strategies in Walgett.

There is a [mismatch between fragmented government funding](#) for specific programs through separate departments and the reality, which is the need for a holistic and responsive approach to wellbeing for children, young people, and their families. When the DEG has engaged in discussions with mainstream agencies about a transition of programs to community control, they have learnt that the kinds of contracts that government provides for youth-focused programs would not enable the community-led, holistic and collaborative work that is needed, due to their focus on specific outputs often disconnected from young peoples' real needs.

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Like many ACCOs, the DEG has for many years requested and advocated for more information and accountability from governments around resources allocated for their community. Through [our research](#) we have learned that there is no clear and consistent way for communities to access data about what governments are spending through procurement and grants in their local communities or regions. There is also no way for communities to track progress or delivery, access details of contracts, monitor whether expectations and outcomes are being met, or be part of the evaluation process or easily access final evaluations (even if they contributed to them). Through [further research](#), we identified that the same is true for budget allocations and government spending. Despite commitments through Closing the Gap and evidence about the greater impact of ACCO-led change for Aboriginal children and young people, government processes and resource allocation continues to happen far away from community control. As set out in that research, it does not have to be this way.

### **Why is it so hard for ACCOs to obtain government data to support evidence-based decision making despite government commitments?**

A particular focus of YN is on increasing the understanding and strategic use of administrative data to inform our planning, evaluation and progress towards YN's long-term aims. This is achieved through an iterative process of collaboration and capacity building between the DEG, UNSW and other stakeholders.

Most of YN's early analysis of administrative data used publicly available data, including aggregated census, police, court, fines and education data. To enable more detailed analysis of youth justice system interactions, in 2022, YN analysed de-identified unit record data provided by BOCSAR to measure changes over time in diversions, criminal court, and youth detention, before and after the Two River Pathway to Change model commenced. The findings were interpreted in conversations between the DEG and Research and Evaluation team and published as a [research report](#).

However, it was clear that justice system data are only one part of this puzzle, and that health, child protection, housing and education data are also important to a holistic understanding. It was also apparent that analysing publicly available data from different government agencies cannot provide that understanding. The lack of flexibility of and gaps in publicly available data, and the limitation of analysing individual datasets in isolation, demonstrated the need for linked (de-identified) unit record data from multiple agencies to build on this work.

DEG developed a [Data Linkage Protocol](#), underpinned by YN's core principles. The Data Linkage Protocol is guiding all stages of the study, through an iterative process of sharing knowledge, interpretation and decision-making by YN's Research and Evaluation team and the DEG.

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YN's current work on data linkage is focused on a population based retrospective cohort study linking child protection, out of home care, health, housing, education, fines and criminal justice data for children and young people from Walgett and their immediate family members. This will enhance understanding of, and inform locally-led responses to, the relationships between institutional contact and pathways and different experiences and outcomes for children and young people in Walgett, and what works to help Aboriginal children and young people to thrive.

The overall objective of this data linkage study is to improve the community's understanding of and inform locally-led responses to the complex relationships between different experiences and outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people in Walgett and what works to help children and young people to thrive. This study will also have impact beyond the Walgett community as a demonstration of the operationalisation of IDG protocols; how research institutions and government departments can support Indigenous communities to lead their own research agendas.

However, as discussed in an [2024 article](#) in the International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice (references omitted, emphasis added):

*Under Priority Reform Four of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Australian governments agreed to “share available, disaggregated regional data and information with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities on Closing the Gap, subject to meeting privacy requirements” (Closing the Gap, 2020; clause 72. a, p.14). However, Yuwaya Ngarra-li's attempts to obtain de-identified administrative data about people in Walgett for community-led research has identified institutional failures with respect to some agencies denying or hindering access to community data. This points to the need to better educate government entities to understand their role as custodians of data for which they are currently responsible but which, we argue, belong to the people who contribute to these data collections. Enabling community access to community data is fundamental to operationalising IDG. **For how long must communities face barriers to accessing data for their own community, despite this being an agreed Closing the Gap priority?***

Yours sincerely

Sandra Suey-Thorne

Speaker, Dharriwaa Elders Group

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### Appendix A

#### The Dharriwaa Elders Group and Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership

The Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG) is a long-standing Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation in Walgett in north-west NSW. The DEG is an association of Aboriginal Elders that provides leadership on a range of community development and cultural activities in Walgett, established in 2000 in response to local community priorities and aspirations as a project of the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service led by Founding Chairperson George Rose OAM.

DEG operates for the benefit of the Walgett Aboriginal community, bringing deep understanding of and connection to local community priorities. DEG is an incorporated association of its Full Members who are Aboriginal people over the age of 60 living in Walgett.

DEG is led by the Elders Council (directors) Speaker Sandra Suey-Thorne, Secretary Elizabeth Williams, Treasurer Rick Townsend, and Margaret Pallister and Norma Kennedy supported by the DEG Leadership Team of Wendy Spencer, Loretta Weatherall, Vanessa Hickey and Zoe Sands.

The DEG currently employs 15 local Aboriginal people working on programs and services designed through listening to what children, young people and families want and guided by the words and the ways of working of our Old People, carrying on their hopes for the future generations.

- *Walgett Youth Wellbeing Service: Nurturing the wellbeing of children and young people through programs and support.*
- *Ngarrangarra-li Walaaybaa (Look After Home Country) River Rangers: Engaging youth in environmental stewardship and cultural learning on Country.*
- *Community Troubleshooting: Women's and Men's Groups, providing systemic and individual advocacy on issues such as electricity bills, housing and community-led emergency responses.*
- *Dealing with Fines program: Assisting community members in managing and clearing outstanding fines.*
- *Food and Water for Life program: Food and water security responses for the Walgett Aboriginal Community.*
- *Elders Support and Transport Program: Providing an Elders Centre and activities to bring Elders together and support their interests and wellbeing.*

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- *Aboriginal Cultural Centre: Supporting knowledge exchange through cultural activities, a Keeping Place and knowledge management and advocacy including protecting Country and Aboriginal Cultural Heritage – unfunded for some years*

Working closely with the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service (WAMS), DEG has been actively engaged in advocacy and research over the past two decades. After collaboration on a research study investigating the criminalisation and incarceration of Aboriginal people with mental health disorders and cognitive disability from 2011-2015, the DEG invited UNSW to work with them to address their long-term vision for positive social change in their community in what has become the 'Yuwaya Ngarra-li' partnership.

Our collaboration aims to improve the environment, life pathways and wellbeing of Aboriginal people living in Walgett through collaboration on evidence-based initiatives, research, and building local community capabilities and control. The goals of the Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership are:

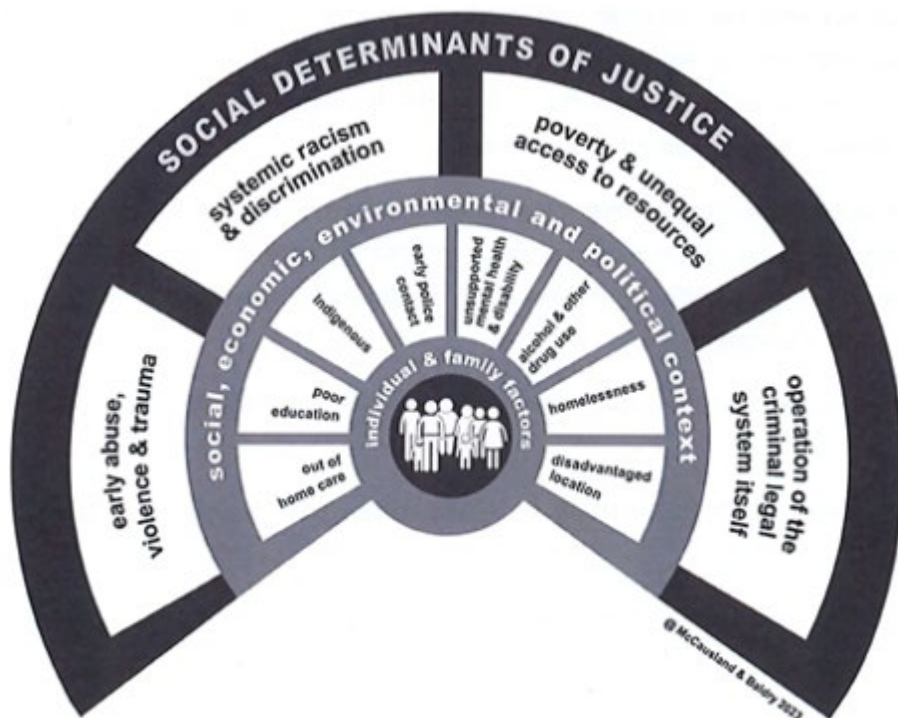
1. Greater Aboriginal community control and capacity
2. Increased numbers of Aboriginal young people in education, training and employment
3. Reduced numbers of Aboriginal people in contact with the criminal justice system
4. Improved social determinants of health and wellbeing amongst Aboriginal people
5. Increased sustainable management of water and Country
6. Redirection of funding towards strengths-based, holistic, community-led initiatives.

Since the early foundations of the YN partnership, there was a shared understanding between DEG and UNSW that any collaboration had to move beyond individual studies or programmes to focusing on long-term solutions to the causes of disadvantage and discrimination experienced by Aboriginal people in Walgett. In its emphasis on effecting systemic change, the YN partnership is committed to contributing to a broader evidence base that can benefit Aboriginal communities and improve research and policy. All our work is underpinned by YN's core principles of being community-led, culturally connected, holistic, strengths-focused and rights-based. This work has been resourced by the Paul Ramsay Foundation since 2018.

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### Galuma-li and Walgett Youth Wellbeing Service and the Social Determinants of Justice

Yuwaya Ngarra-li's approach to reducing young people's contact with the criminal justice system is guided by the Social Determinants of Justice research by Ruth McCausland and Eileen Baldry, displayed in the figure below



Yuwaya Ngarra-li is addressing the social determinants of justice in multiple ways including:

**Disadvantaged location:** focus on Walgett, consistently measured as one of the most disadvantaged locations in the country in terms of income, health, housing, education and employment outcomes.

**Being Indigenous:** Aboriginal people in Walgett are leading and designed to benefit from all of YN's efforts.

**Early police contact:** YN's Two River Pathway to Change model is focused on reduction of contact with police and associated criminalisation for young people in all spheres, and building of wellbeing and non-justice positive pathways.

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**Poor education:** The DEG has long advocated to improve outcomes in local schools; the DEG Wellbeing Lead is on the School Reference Group and YN has contributed advice, evidence and community-led proposals for change. YN has developed a flexible learning program that could be implemented with young people in the future.

**Out of home care:** A high proportion of the children and young people with complex needs that DEG staff have supported are 'crossover kids' in the child protection and youth justice systems; the new YWS is focused on providing trauma-informed community-led support for this cohort.

**Unsupported mental health, disability and AOD needs:** The YWS is specifically focused on supporting criminalised children and young people with complex needs created by a lack of local, culturally appropriate disability, mental health and AOD support.

**Homelessness and insecure housing:** YN has developed a model of culturally-oriented supported accommodation for young people in contact with the justice system that is intended to be integral to the design of the new local wellbeing service, and is advocating for improved housing quality and quantity generally in Walgett.

**ABUSE, VIOLENCE & TRAUMA:** building culturally-connected, trauma-informed, therapeutic support & services

**SYSTEMIC RACISM & DISCRIMINATION:** increased Aboriginal community control & voice, agency accountability

**POVERTY & UNEQUAL ACCESS TO RESOURCES:** reducing debt and building skills and employment outcomes

**OPERATION OF THE CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM ITSELF:** focusing on reducing criminalisation and dominance of police, holding justice actors to account and building wellbeing and non-justice pathways for Aboriginal people.