Return to country—addressing Indigenous health and homelessness in far north Queensland

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Abstract

Cairns has high numbers of homeless people, 10% of whom are from remote areas of Cape York. Many residents of Cape York communities become stranded in Cairns following visits to health services or upon release from the local prison. Financial constraints, such as low incomes and overpriced flights (up to $550 one way), prevent them returning to their home communities. Many also suffer from substance abuse, chronic health problems and mental health disorders, which are further compounded by homelessness. The response to homelessness is also a drain on medical resources due to high numbers of hospital admissions, and street-based security and police resources due to many public nuisance calls.

This research followed 22 participants who were returned to their remote communities in 2012 under a pilot program offered by the Cairns police, the “Return to Country” project. The project assists homeless individuals who want to return to their communities by providing monetary advances from Centrelink, booking flights subsidised by the local airline, undertaking medical health checks, obtaining clothes/hygiene packs, transport to airport and ensuring the individual is on board the aircraft. Participants who have consented to participate in a follow up study will be interviewed to ascertain their satisfaction with the Return to Country project, to determine their trajectories to homelessness, their health and housing needs, engagement with services, and current situation in their home community.

The interviews will provide information on how the program can be improved and how services may be delivered within their home communities. The outcome of this study will be to develop and implement a revised, sustainable Return to Country project, by collaborating with the 28 homelessness service agencies, Indigenous health services, Queensland (QLD) Health and the QLD Police Service.

Introduction

Indigenous (Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander) peoples from remote localities are frequent travellers to urban centres, often referred to as the ‘urban drift’. With insufficient temporary accommodation available to meet the demands of these visitors, there is an increased risk of temporary homelessness within this group. This is further exacerbated by the lack of financial means to be able to return to home communities because of the significant costs.

A high percentage of the homeless Indigenous people currently in the Cairns area are residents from the Cape York region. After moving to Cairns for various reasons (medical/health treatment, visiting family or attending events, court appearances or being released from the nearby prison and escaping community life from the remoteness, violence or tropical weather) many are unable to return to their communities and become stranded. Cairns also has a higher proportion of homeless people, estimated at 11.6% compared with QLD at 6.3%. Unacceptably high rates of Indigenous homelessness exist in the Cairns City area, with approximations at 265 per 10,000.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that most Indigenous peoples stranded in Cairns want to return to their community if they were able, and there are many reports of people asking for services to broker a return trip. The Queensland Council of Social Services (QCOSS), recommends to “[a]llow participating agencies the flexibility to enact local changes and innovative responses to improve homelessness service systems”. QCOSS further detailed results of the Regional Homelessness Forum held in seven regions including Cairns. QCOSS emphasised ‘thinking outside the box and how to do things differently with existing resources’. The report also highlights engaging community services outside homelessness and housing and also the “need for better service system coordination”.

12th National Rural Health Conference 1
In 2012, the Queensland Police Service (QPS) implemented a voluntary ‘Return to Country’ (R2C) project to assist Cape York residents, who were stranded or temporarily homeless, to return back to their home communities. Approval is contingent on a clear health check, advance payment via Centrelink, confirmation that there is a ‘home’ to return to and that the community would welcome the return of the person. In previous years, various programs have been developed with mixed success.

Methods
The QPS supplied James Cook University (JCU) researchers with a list of those who had used the R2C program. Initial consent for follow up was obtained by the QPS which enabled the person’s name and community location to be provided to JCU. Interviews were conducted in four remote Cape York, far north Queensland Indigenous communities. These include Aurukun, Lockhart River, Mapoon and Napranum. English is not the first language among all participants and local research workers were employed to assist with locating the individuals and if needed, language translation. A second consent form was obtained before a fifteen minute interview was conducted. To date, 22 participants were able to be followed up across three communities although, data collection is still ongoing.

The project has been approved by the JCU Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number H4813 and H4986).

Objectives
Follow up of the QPS R2C participants in their home communities to:

- ascertain how they became aware of the R2C program and their satisfaction with the service
- document details of treatment needs and possibilities of engagement in treatment before participating in the program (i.e. if there is suitable access in the home community to which they are returning to)
- map the participant’s trajectories to homelessness, including history of homelessness, the reason they came to Cairns, reasons for becoming stranded in Cairns and factors that inhibited their return to home communities
- explore ‘rough sleepers’ knowledge about, and engagement with, homeless services while in Cairns
- how the participant’s personal health and well-being has been since returning to their home community.

The outcome of this study will be to engage with services in order to develop and implement a revised, sustainable R2C project.

Participants
Participants involved in this research are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples who had accessed and used the R2C program to return home to their communities from Cairns. All participants were over eighteen years of age and gave consent to be interviewed.

Results
Since February 2012, the R2C project has facilitated the return of 71 participants to return to their respective Cape York Indigenous communities which include: Aurukun, Lockhart River, Coen, Napranum, Mapoon, Bamaga, Kowanyama, Mornington Island and Normanton. JCU, Cairns Campus has conducted (to date) remote research and data collation from 22 participants contained within the target group with visits to Aurukun, Lockhart River, Mapoon and Napranum. As at December 2012 the location of the remaining participants are as follows: Aurukun (n=5), Bamaga (n=3), Coen (n=19), Kowanyama (n=2), Mornington Island (n=2) and Pormpuraaw (n=8). JCU will
conduct further follow up trips in 2013 to communities, pending funding, and ideally would like to travel to Aurukun, Coen and Pormpuraaw to follow up 39 available participants.

Contained within the 71 participants, QPS have identified a known total of 10 persons (7%) have since returned to Cairns or moved away from their respective community since their repatriation. Preliminary analysis of the data (to date) revealed a total of 14 males and 8 females were interviewed for this study. All 22 participants had stable accommodation in their respective communities in households ranging between one and seven adults/children.

Reason Indigenous Community peoples were visiting Cairns were:

- released from the rehabilitation unit in Yarrabah (20 km outside Cairns CBD)
- released from Lotus Glen Correctional Centre
- visiting family and friends
- appointment with eye specialist
- visited hospital
- attended a course and missed flight
- came to help partner who was stranded.

Of the participants, 13 of 22 stayed sometimes or regularly in the diversionary centre and the remainder stayed with family/friends or moved around houses.

The reasons Indigenous Community peoples returned to home community included:

- sorry business (funeral)
- to see my kids
- house opening
- no accommodation in Cairns
- to see relatives who are ill
- see friends
- four people released from the local prison, Lotus Glen Correctional Centre (LGCC) who missed their flight home.

Of all the participants, only two listed that they had seen services to assist them while in Cairns. Homeless services accessed by participants while in Cairns were:

- a drug consultant
- food from Rosie’s food van
- church people
- one participant detailed the Tuesday morning visit from a range of services to the shelter including Mission Australia, OzCare and Wuchopperen.

Eight participants identified services that could assist with accommodation, although the remainder either stated ‘No’/‘don’t know’ to this question. Approximately eight policing hours are required to assist in returning one participant home, thus over the course of the program to date, a total of approximately 580 policing hours have been invested in the Return to Country program.
Discussion

The JCU audit and evaluation report to Council in January 2011 identified that homelessness issues dominated police time as well as street-based security time.(8) In September 2010 homelessness comprised 44% of all incidents and in January 2011 it comprised 33% of all incidents. The evaluation also confirmed that the highest percentages of incidents were recorded at night. Homelessness made up 41% of all night-time incidents in January 2011.(8) The use of resources by police and security to address homelessness in the inner city is insurmountable over time, given that five hundred and eight police hours have been spent on the R2C program alone.

The multiagency approach has also resulted in people from the Cape being recognised early through outreach as having R2C issues and they are referred immediately to the Police Liaison Officer’s and they are assisted to return home. The IAO has also identified persons being released from Lotus Glen Correctional Centre and the Cairns Base Hospital (CBH) and unable to return home. These people are referred to the PLO’s and returned to their home community. The release of persons from communities from LGCC and the CBH has long been identified as a significant contributor to rough sleeping in Cairns. This is tentatively supported by the QPS R2C data. However fifty-six recipients did not have a reason documented for being in Cairns. The IAO is assisting to alleviate this gap by including a Corrections Officer in their future outreach. This IAO approach has resulted in less persons remaining unnecessarily on the streets sleeping rough and/or taking up beds at the diversionary centre that could be utilised for those who are long-term homeless.

This JCU study has identified that thirteen of the twenty-two people interviewed regularly made use of the diversionary centre when they came to Cairns, thus supporting this issue. It would appear that these participants regularly use the centre as a ‘motel’, utilising it during the night and frequenting the inner city by day. Nonetheless, the issue of diversionary being at capacity by seven o’clock at night leaves few options for services such as the police. A long-term issue for the police is where to take a heavily intoxicated homeless person when the diversionary is full every night. Addressing the inappropriate use of diversionary may free-up urgently needed beds for those most in need and for the more vulnerable homeless rough sleepers. This inappropriate use of the diversionary centre could be alleviated by supplying temporary accommodation for people from the Cape which could be booked at nominal cost ahead of time, rather than have them taking up much needed beds at diversionary.

The release of persons from communities from LGCC, the CBH and rehabilitation centres at Yarrabah and Mareeba is a further identified issue. A synchronised approach to the release of persons from these institutions through coordination and information sharing by the relevant institutions and homeless service agencies is necessary to avoid these releasees becoming homeless on the streets, as is currently occurring. Assisting those attending these institutions to return to their home communities safely is of primary important, but also ensuring they have adequate transport and someone to wait with them at the airport is also a dedicated requirement.

Greater coordination between services and information sharing to systematically address homeless issues has been called for in Cairns since 2008.(18) However, to date, this has still not been achieved or adequately addressed. The IAO program instigated by Cairns Regional Council’s CitySafe program is contributing to alleviating this deficit, although data sharing is still in its infancy and is struggling to gain unanimous support from agencies. The final issue elucidated by this study is community peoples being stranded due to lack of finances or missing flights. Reasonably affordable return airfares are urgently needed so people don’t effectively become stranded in Cairns. If a package fare was available with an open return date, this would alleviate issues of people not being able to afford the airfare once they are in Cairns. The Queensland State Government has ceased to fund the R2C program but the QPS are continuing the program through local support and in-kind contributions from community services and agencies. Given the positive response to the program and the take-up by community peoples, it is puzzling why the government would choose to withdraw funding from such a crucial
program. The inability to return to home communities is a clear indicator for rough sleeping and this funding issues needs to be revisited by the state government.

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References