Aboriginal Youth Development: A Community Based Program in Far West NSW

Peter Kenny,
Far West Ward Aboriginal Service

5th National Rural Health Conference
Adelaide, South Australia, 14-17th March 1999
Proceedings
INTRODUCTION

The Lower Sector of the Far West Area Health Service represents the most remote region of NSW, and is managed by the Far West Ward Aboriginal Health Service on a Partnership basis. There are just over 35,000 people living in the area covered by the Far West Ward Aboriginal Health Service (FWWAHS), with 21,000 of these living in Broken Hill and the remainder residing in small communities scattered over an area equal to almost one sixth of the total area of New South Wales. Of this population the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is 13 per cent, ranging from 58 per cent in Wilcannia to 4 per cent in Broken Hill. However, as in many rural and remote communities, the indigenous population is significantly younger than the non-indigenous population (Fig 1). This significantly higher proportion of young people, high unemployment rates within the Indigenous community and lower available family income all contribute to under participation in the already restricted range of recreational, educational and sporting and social support options available to young people in these remote communities.

Lack of cultural familiarity, together with poor coordination both between Services and between Services and the Aboriginal community have also limited access to services and facilities relevant to youth. The inability to empower the community in developing novel strategies for service provision to children and young people has been restricted by the lack of human resources committed to this intensive community development role. Similarly, community organisations have not made full use of Agency based programs for youth support due to lack of awareness of resources and skills in seeking funding.

The Far West Ward Aboriginal Health Service recognises the importance of the broader social, economic and environmental factors on the health and well being of Aboriginal young people and their communities. This paper describes the involvement of the Far West Ward Aboriginal Health Service with other Agencies in supporting community based programs for the development of young Aboriginal people in two communities of Far West NSW.
FAR WEST ABORIGINAL YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Early in 1998, community members in several remote communities of Far West NSW began to develop strategies to address the social and emotional well-being of their young people. In each community the principal strategy was similar. This involved linking the human resources of community members and community organisations with the financial support and professional expertise of Agencies and local Service providers.

Since that time, Youth Working Groups, consisting of both community and Agency representatives, have met regularly in Wilcannia and Broken Hill and more recently in Menindee. These Working Groups have been developing local and regional projects which:

- support the “nurturant authority” of community members for their young people in preference to the transfer of this authority to Agencies;
- increase the range of recreational, educational, sporting and cultural options for young people in their communities;
- are developed and implemented by community organisations and community members, with support from Agencies, so that, projects are sustained by being built into the life of the community;
- employ elders and community members as supervisors, educators, mentors and cultural guides;
- expose children to a broader network of supportive and trusted adults within their own community;
- seeks to engage parents, elders, carers and other family members in all activities;
- considers the lack of access which results from restricted family finances and lack of personal transport, by provision of transport to and from activities and by subsidising costs; and
- encourages participation of Service providers from a range of Agencies to take part in activities both as supervisors, becoming more familiar with children and their needs, and through development of novel approaches to service provision and life skills, health and other education.
The Working Groups have put in place a broad range of projects, employing the resources of Land Councils, CDEPs, Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups, the FWWAHS, and many Agencies relevant to the well being of young people.

The following is an outline of some of the projects of the Program in each of two communities, including barriers which need to be overcome.

1. Youth Development in Broken Hill

During the second semester of 1998, up to 30 Aboriginal children and young people were involved in a TAFE funded arts and crafts program with artists from Thankakali Aboriginal Corporation, Broken Hill. As with the broader Youth Development Program, the After-School Arts project was an initiative of a Youth Working Group which brought together a wide range of community organisations and Agencies to cooperatively address the needs of Aboriginal young people in Broken Hill.

The After-School Program was a core activity of the Working Group, providing regular and on-going interaction between adults and a group of at risk young people and their peers. The Program centred around the development of a range of arts and crafts skills under the supervision of artists from Thankakali CDEP for two hours, one night each week. The Arts Program was complemented by a range of other activities on a second afternoon of each week, including sports, short trips, and bush-tucker activities, with the same group of supervisors working on a voluntary basis. The After-School Program was developed to promote self-esteem and cultural awareness in the children and to develop a broader range of skills and personal interests. The involvement of Thankakali CDEP, the major community-controlled employer of Aboriginal people in Broken Hill, ensured the long-term survival of the Program.

Local Service providers participating in the program included staff from the Aboriginal Health Service (including youth workers, Aboriginal health workers and nurses), the local Adolescent Support worker with the Mental Health Team, police and others. A communal meal was included with each session to strengthen the sense of a shared learning experience between children and adults.

During 1998, the Program was restricted by problems relating to transport. However the Program now has a 23-seater bus (provided by the Far West Ward Aboriginal Health Service) dedicated to the Youth Development Program. The bus has allowed the group to extend the range of activities in the Youth Development Program to include week-end trips, camps, and a school holiday program.

2. Youth Development in Wilcannia

The Youth Working Group in Wilcannia has been supported by Project Officers from the Wilcannia Coordinated Care Trial, a Commonwealth Government supported, integrated Service delivery model which reflects the interagency collaboration of the Youth Working Group. The Trial is sponsored by the FWWAHS which enhances the level of community participation in both the CCT
and of the Youth Working Group. In Wilcannia, the Working Group also advises the Wilcannia Community Working Party on issues relating to young people. These linkages provide both a strong community base to projects and a strong health focus through the involvement of the FWWAHS. In particular, Elders, through the Working Group, have indicated that resources should be made available to enable Elders to make decisions on cultural matters and guide projects and events relating to culture.

Major projects include the Parntu Youth Outreach, an Arts based Program of training which includes both CDEP employees and young people who have left mainstream schooling early. This Program is supported by a range of small Arts grants, but as with the Thankakali model, support for a TAFE based program is being negotiated.

**Culture Camps**

As is the case in Broken Hill, the Youth Working Group is addressing the needs of young people across a broad range of issues. However there has been a major interest in providing young people with an opportunity to be away from the Town in a Camp environment with Elders and other community members. The Camps provide a relaxed and reflective space for the sharing of cultural knowledge, as well as discussions around sexual health, relationships, and other issues relevant to young people. In particular, community people and Elders ensure that cultural camps are a means of educating youth on hunting, fishing, food gathering, bush medicine, firewood, camping and visiting cultural sites of significance. The camps also provide elders with an opportunity to share cultural knowledge from the past and discuss this in relation to contemporary issues.

The Camps are first discussed amongst the Working Group, but the planning, implementation and evaluation are carried by Elders and other community members, who invite particular Service providers to attend, depending on the focus of the Camp. Evaluation usually involves a discussion between supervisors, participants and carers around a communal meal. Parts of each camp are also documented by photograph and video so that the experience can also be shared with parents and relatives.

Workers with the local Aboriginal Land Council are involved with the Camps as supervisors and cultural guides as part of their CDEP commitment. For extended Camps, wages are further subsidised through other sources. Sites for these camps include Mutawintji and Kinchega National Parks, Weinteriga Station (Owned and operated by the Wilcannia LALC).

**Supporting community members in their role**

In supporting community members to participate fully in the development and implementation of these youth projects, training in relevant skills is being provided as needed. This has included first-aid training, sessions relating to child protection issues and duty-of-care, community based workshops on family violence, programming for school holiday or after-school projects, mentor training and development of submissions for funding.
In most cases, training makes use of resources already available in the community, through local Service providers or community members with train-the-trainer experience.

**BARRIERS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

In coordinating Agencies to support community based projects for youth development there have been a number of issues with which the Working Groups are continually working through. With human and other resources being drawn from a wide range of Agencies and organisations, it is necessary to clearly define where legal liability lies for the project as a whole. Similarly, where a range of Agencies are contributing financially or in other ways to projects developed and implemented by community members, there are often several sets of criteria which supervisors must meet, while building up of the skills of potential supervisors is ongoing. Agency funding is frequently client based, so that offering these preventive activities more broadly in the community can require negotiation for each new activity which is undertaken.

In the longer term we would like to extended the Program to other communities in Far West NSW. However the coordinating role, keeping each Agency and organisation informed and involved in projects, is intensive. It may be necessary to identify a position within at least one Agency in each community which is dedicated to the preventive, community development approach to the needs of children and young people.

**CONCLUSION**

The Far West Ward Aboriginal Health Service, together with other Agencies and community organisations, is attempting to address the needs of Aboriginal young people in the region by building a framework for youth development into the life of each community. This involves intensive cooperation between local Service providers, community organisations and Elders, ongoing development of skills amongst community members to initiate and implement projects, and identification of financial and other resources to ensure sustainability of projects. The coordination of these activities requires the commitment of positions to this community development role.

**REFERENCES**