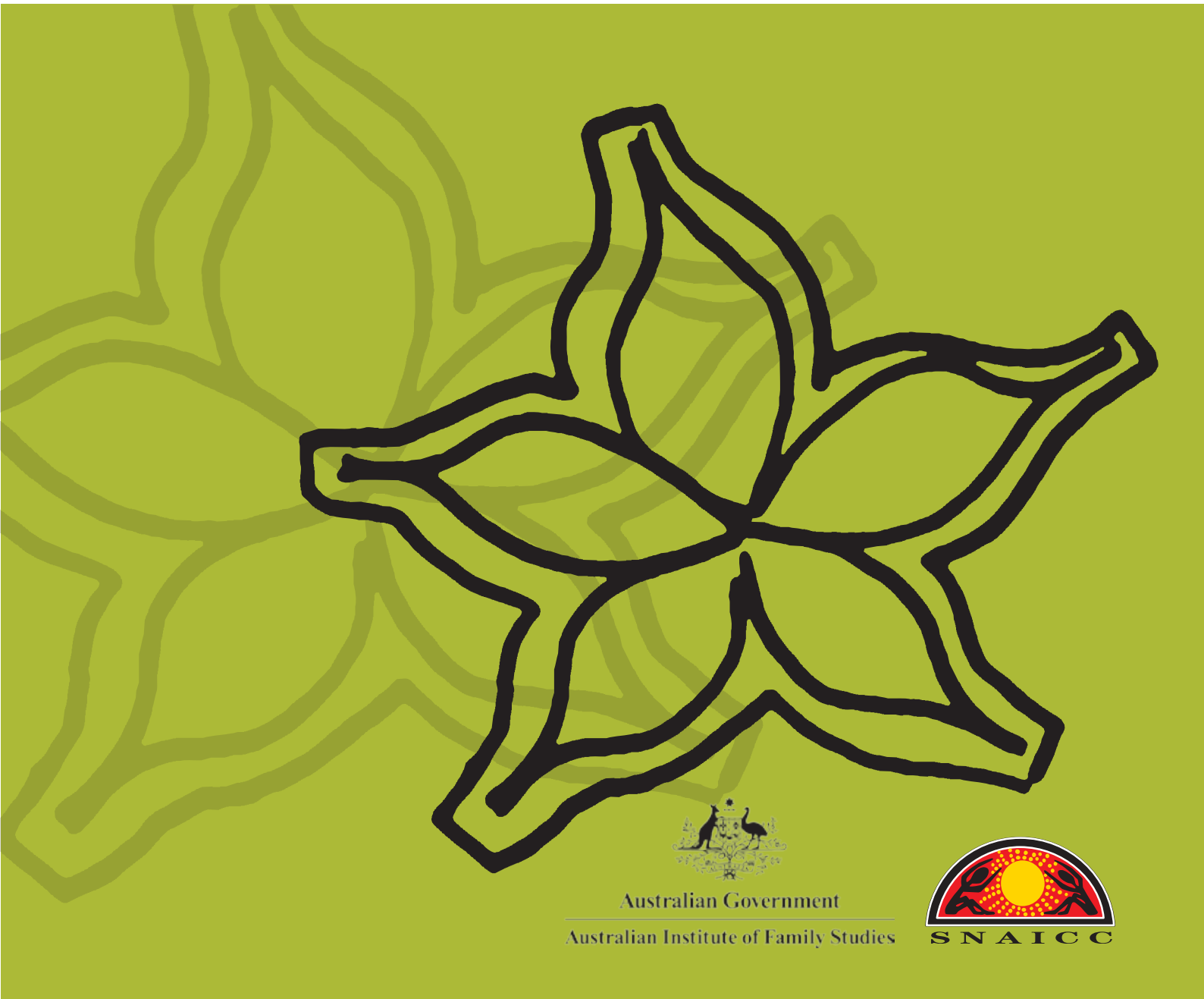
Promising Practices in Out-of-Home Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Carers, Children and Young People: Profiling Promising Programs

Booklet 1

Characteristics of promising Indigenous out-of-home care programs and services

This project was conducted as a collaboration between the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care



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National Child Protection Clearinghouse

The National Child Protection Clearinghouse has operated from the Australian Institute of Family Studies since 1995. The Clearinghouse is funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs as part of its response to child abuse and neglect. The Clearinghouse collects, produces and distributes information and resources, conducts research, and offers specialist advice on the latest developments in child abuse prevention, child protection, and out-of-home care.

Contents

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The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Inc. (SNAICC) is the national non-government peak body in Australia representing the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The SNAICC Resource Service (SRS) works across the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family and children's services sector to produce and distribute practical resources and information.

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Stronger Families and Communities Strategy
An Australian Government Initiative

Characteristics of promising Indigenous out-of-home care programs and services

Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to suffer the intergenerational effects of past welfare practices including the forced removal of their children and dislocation from their communities, country and culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also experience higher levels of poverty and social disadvantage than non-Indigenous Australians. The combined effects of past practices and current disadvantages present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with extreme challenges in supporting families to ensure children stay safe and are cared for appropriately.

Bringing them Home, the inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families reported that:

> 'Between 1 in 3 and 1 in 10 Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families from 1910 to 1970 ...
>
> [M]ost families have been affected, in one or more generations, by the forcible removal of one or more children.'
>
> (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997, p. 37.)[1]

The inquiry found that some of the underlying causes for the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care include:

- The legacy of past policies of cultural assimilation;
- The intergenerational effects of forced removals;
- Poverty;
- Cultural differences in child-rearing practices.

(Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997, p. 37.)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are almost five times more likely to be placed in out-of-home care compared with non-Indigenous children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007).[2] Yet there is a serious shortage of culturally appropriate placements to accommodate them. Even with intensive recruitment efforts, professionals have been unable to recruit sufficient Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers to meet the demand.

Project background

Phase 1: Identifying Strengths and Barriers

In 2005, the National Child Protection Clearinghouse, at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, was commissioned by the Australian Council for Children and Parenting's (ACCAP) Children at Risk Committee, to conduct:

- A literature review titled *The Recruitment, Retention and Support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Foster Carers: A Literature Review.* (Richardson, Bromfield, & Higgins, 2005); and
- Interviews and focus groups with professionals from government, non-government and Indigenous organisations, as well as carers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and Indigenous young

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1 Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission. 1997. *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (Australia). Sydney: Author.

2 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2007), *Child Protection Australia 2005-06*. Canberra: Author.

people in care titled *Enhancing Out-of-Home Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young People*. (Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2005).[3]

In the interviews and focus groups, participants were asked to talk about what they thought were barriers to recruiting, assessing, training and supporting carers and young people, and the strategies that worked well. The project was funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA).

Professionals, carers and young people told us of barriers and gaps in program and service delivery, and identified ineffective practices such as culturally inappropriate assessment tools and training programs. The participants highlighted the need to develop more effective and culturally relevant recruitment, assessment and training strategies. Carers also told us they needed more support in a range of areas such as dealing with state and territory child protection departments, and caring for children with increasingly complex needs. Young people told us they wanted more connection with their family and communities while in care. Importantly, the participants also identified examples of promising practice in the field, where effective and culturally relevant strategies had been developed to overcome barriers in these areas.

Phase 2: Profiling Promising Programs

In response to the needs identified by the participants, and guided by the examples of promising practice they shared with us, FaCSIA funded the Australian Institute of Family Studies to extend the program to profile promising practices in out-of-home care (this phase of the project is referred to as Phase 2: Profiling Promising Programs). In mid-2006, the Australian Institute of Family Studies, in collaboration with SNAICC (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care), profiled promising programs and services across Australia in order to disseminate the information to other professionals in the out-of-home care sector.

The organisations profiled for Phase 2

The organisations profiled for Phase 2 were identified by SNAICC and AIFS as having promising programs and services in the sector. The term 'promising' describes programs that have been successful in meeting their goals and objectives, but which have not necessarily been externally evaluated. While a few of the profiled programs had been externally evaluated, the majority had not, and the term 'promising' applies to the collection of programs profiled for this project.

The profiled organisations delivered a range of services. Some were regional hubs that served remote communities, some directed their services to meet the needs of families, and others supported the needs of carers or young people.[4]

Eleven programs and services around Australia were included in *Phase 2: Profiling Promising Programs* of the research project. These programs by no means represent an inclusive list of the promising practices in out-of-home care that have been developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and Indigenous units in government departments. In order to limit the study to 11 profiles, we have tried to include a diverse range of programs and organisations from most states and territories. The programs are:

1. *Step by Step* Aboriginal assessment tool – (Association of Childrens Welfare of Agencies, in collaboration with the Department of Community Services, Aboriginal Services Branch, Sydney, NSW)
2. *Yarning about Kids with Yorganop Carers* – Indigenous-specific training program for general and kinship carers (Yorganop, Perth, WA)
3. *Growing Up Our Kids Safe and Strong* – Indigenous-specific training program for kinship carers (Department for Child Protection, formerly the Department for Community Development, Fostering Services, Perth, WA)

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[3] The reports, and summary papers prepared from the reports, are available on the NCPC website www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/promisingpractices/summarypapers/menu.html

[4] The term 'children' is used in this booklet to refer to both children and young people. Where programs and services directly relate to older children, the term 'young people' is used.

4. *Aboriginal Carers Network* – Carer support group network (Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat, Sydney, NSW)

5. *IFACSS* – Comprehensive support service for kinship and general carers (Indigenous Family and Child Support Service, Brisbane, Qld)

6. *Keeping Kids Connected* – Short-term emergency placements with non-Indigenous carers (Aboriginal Family Support Services, Adelaide, SA)

7. *Panyappi* – Mentoring service for Indigenous young people (Metropolitan Aboriginal Youth and Family Services, Adelaide, SA)

8. *Marungbai* – Leaving and after care service for Indigenous young people (Great Lakes Manning Aboriginal Children's Services, Taree, NSW)

9. *Lakidjeka* – Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice and Support Service (Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, Melbourne, Vic)

10. *RAATSICC* – Remote community response to child protection issues (Remote Area Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care, Cairns, Qld)

11. *Safe Families* – Family-inclusive approach to addressing child protection issues (Tangentyere Shire Council, Alice Springs, NT)

Organisations whose views contributed to the development of the material but were not profiled were:

- The Central Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency, Rockhampton, Qld;
- The Department for Child Protection (formerly the Department for Community Development), Indigenous Policy Unit, Perth, WA.

In profiling promising practices, researchers consulted with chief executive officers, program or service managers, coordinators and family support workers. They were asked what they believed the main characteristics of their programs were that made them work so well, and what steps they took to get them up and running. The participants who shared their knowledge and expertise in the consultations were invited to give feedback on the material, and their approval on relevant sections of the final draft was sought before it was published.[5]

The booklets

The findings from Phase 2 are presented in four individual booklets. Each booklet covers a theme in relation to out-of-home care with profiles of successful programs and services relevant to that theme. Where practicable, profiles are accompanied by practice models relating to that theme.

In booklet 1, *Characteristics of promising Indigenous out-of-home care programs and services*, common characteristics of the organisations' programs and services that we profiled are outlined. These cover two areas: organisational practice and service delivery.

In booklet 2, *Assessing, training and recruiting Indigenous carers*, specific programs that assess and train Indigenous general and kinship carers are profiled, and a model of how successful organisations have conducted effective carer recruitment, based on the findings from Phase 1, is also included.

In booklet 3, *Comprehensive support for Indigenous carers and young people*, programs that offer comprehensive support for carers and young people are profiled in detail.

In booklet 4, *Indigenous responses to child protection issues*, programs that collaborate with child protection services to enhance culturally relevant responses to child protection issues are profiled.

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[5] For more information on conducting research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people see: National Health and Medical Research Council, Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2003

Workshop materials from the booklets

A workshop for professionals based on the material in the booklets has been developed to enable professionals to share their experiences, and to explore the suggestions outlined in the booklets. (See Butler, N. & Higgins, J.R. (2007). *Promising Practices in Out-of-Home Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Carers and Children: A Workshop for Professionals*. Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care). For more information on the workshops contact the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care on (03) 9489 8099.

The overlapping nature of the themes

An important finding from the consultations was the overlapping nature of recruitment, assessment, training and support programs and services for enhancing outcomes for carers, children and young people. For example:

- Quality training programs consistently include broader carer support functions such as a telephone support service and advocacy with government departments on behalf of the carer;
- Carers who receive good support or training from their organisations often bring potential carers to the organisation, thereby facilitating the recruitment of new carers;
- Carers who are appropriately trained and resourced develop skills, knowledge and confidence in their caring role. This leads to improved outcomes for children and young people in their care;
- Children and young people whose needs are being met through culturally appropriate placements with well-resourced carers, or by programs designed to support their needs, demonstrate increased wellbeing such as improved school attendance, a reduction in problem behaviours, and an enhanced sense of identity and cultural connectedness.

What works for promising Indigenous out-of-home care programs and services

Organisational Practice

Establish effective relationships with stakeholders

- Cultivate KEY RELATIONSHIPS
- Find the right person to CHAMPION the program
- Use an EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION style

Be strategic about seeking project funding and approval

- Be PROACTIVE
- Use the POLITICAL CLIMATE to advantage
- Seek EXPERT ADVICE
- Be TRANSPARENT in accounting processes

Build the profile of the organisation or program

- Encourage strong LEADERSHIP
- Have A VOICE in the mainstream
- Get the COMMUNITY on board

Service Delivery

Identify the organisation's core business

- Use opportunities to REVIEW PRACTICE
- Take on new business that ENHANCES core business
- Operate WITHIN FUNDING parameters

Have a collaborative staffing structure

- Hire SKILLED, COMMITTED INDIGENOUS staff
- Take a TEAMWORK APPROACH

Offer a comprehensive service

- Draw on COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE
- KNOW your target client group
- Take a NEEDS-BASED approach to service delivery
- ADVOCATE for carers and young people
- Be AVAILABLE and RESPONSIVE

Empower the community, carers & young people

- SKILL-UP communities, carers and young people
- Facilitate KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Common characteristics of promising programs and services

In section 1 *Organisational practice* we outline strategies that the organisations profiled described as being effective for them in establishing successful programs or services. Often, these strategies were arrived at after encountering hurdles along the way as the program got up and running. For example, program managers discovered through trial and error that they needed to be proactive about developing a proposal in order to gain approval and funding for a service, or they recognised the value in identifying what their core business was after finding that their service delivery had been too broad and was less effective than it could be.

In section 2 *Service delivery* we discuss ways in which the organisations profiled prioritise and deliver services to communities, carers and children. Again, the strategies for service delivery that have been adopted by the organisations we profiled were often arrived at after trying a number of strategies and determining what worked best.

1. Organisational practice

An important aspect of establishing out-of-home care programs and ensuring they remain viable in the longer term is gaining the support and cooperation of stakeholders who have influence over shaping program scope, approving proposals and granting and renewing funding. Given that most organisations and programs are funded on a time-limited basis, securing ongoing support from key people in government departments and non-government organisations is essential for the ongoing viability of the organisation or program.

The successful organisations that we profiled had similar management characteristics. They:

- Had effective relationships with government departments and non-government organisations;
- Were strategic about seeking project funding and approval;
- Built the profile of the organisation or program in the wider sector.

Establish effective relationships with government departments and non-government organisations

> 'It's about establishing good working relationships with people and organisations and [building] rapport.'
>
> 'There are good people in the department, you just have to find them.'

An essential characteristic of all successful organisations or programs was establishing effective relationships with government departments and non-government organisations. Professionals told us of the importance of having key people in positions of influence who acted as champions for the organisation or program by supporting, lobbying or granting approval for program submissions. In the organisations we profiled, these key people were often senior government officers or community leaders. Developing key relationships, finding the right people in positions of influence to approve and fund programs, and using an effective communication style were important components of achieving successful outcomes with government departments and non-government organisations.

Cultivate key relationships

Professionals from the organisations profiled often cultivated key relationships, and some took a strategic approach to maintaining contact. One senior manager told us that she cultivated a relationship with the state minister in order to lobby effectively for the needs of the organisation:

> 'I recommend that people in authority have direct line of communication with ministers. I've been around a long time and I've made it my business to meet all these people because I know that one day I might need that connection... I'll give the minister a progress report every three months in an email and be very strategic about it.'

Professionals told us that cultivating strong relationships with key contacts was critical in getting the department or other organisations on board to fund projects.

> 'In the last four to five months... we've put proposals in to address long outstanding issues... and the department is funding us for them. It's one or two people you're getting the ear of that are making it happen.'

Find the right person to champion the program

However, many professionals felt that their contacts within departments acted as a barrier to productive outcomes. Professionals described the importance of finding the right person in an organisation or department who would advocate on their behalf and lobby for funding or approval for a certain program.

> 'It's hard to [keep the momentum] when involving other agencies, trying to link up and having time to do that. Having your hands tied when you get to certain points where the department needs to be involved. Having the knowledge about how to overcome those [is important]. Sometimes you don't know who to target to get the answers from. Who you think is the right person is not the right person and that can contain you and it's how you lose your own energy and focus. "Who do I go to here?" If it becomes a wall you can always go around it or over the top of it; but when you come to that, it's "Who is it you need to go to?"'

A number of professionals told us that if they cannot achieve an effective and productive outcome from their assigned departmental representative they will go over their head. If necessary, they take the matter to a regional, state or national level in order to get their needs addressed.

> 'We will be listened to by someone on one step of the ladder... If we go to the region and that doesn't work, we go higher.'

Use an effective communication style

An important message to come from the participants in this study was how to effectively negotiate with key representatives from government departments and other organisations. Professionals told us that taking a confrontational or aggrieved approach rarely got them what they wanted. Instead, effective professionals arm themselves with facts or information and make sure they know what they are talking about when engaging in negotiations.

> 'A lot of people will go out and attack. You can get your point across without yelling at people. A lot of people go in aggrieved, and I'm aggrieved, but you've got to do it strategically... I do it very confidently, and very informed. I've been doing this for 22 years. I've been through a change of government, I know how that level of politics works. I know what those processes are. I know how to engage people. I know what meetings to attend. I know who I need to talk to. And I know how to challenge without being offensive.'

The importance of using effective communication was not only important for professionals, but for carers and young people who have to deal directly with departmental staff as well.

> 'I've never displayed anger to a [departmental] worker and I wouldn't expect carers to do this. You've got to have political savvy and we're teaching them that.'

Be strategic about seeking project funding and approval

An essential component of any successful program or service is obtaining approval and funding. Funding strategies were not explored in depth in this research project. Sufficient funding and adequate resources contribute significantly to an organisation's capacity to deliver high-quality programs, and the issue of appropriate resourcing is an area that requires further research. However, where professionals did touch on strategies they have used that have been successful in securing funding or approval, they are described in this booklet.

Professionals told us that when applying for project approval and funding it is important to be strategic about the way you approach this. Professionals told us that successful organisations need to be proactive about program development, pitch proposals and funding submissions to fit with the current political climate, and seek expert advice where necessary if the organisation does not have all the skills in-house to develop successful proposals.

Be proactive rather than taking a welfare approach

Another important strategy in being successful when applying for funding or approval for a certain project, was being proactive. The people we spoke to knew the importance of moving away from a 'welfare' approach, and becoming proactive about project development and approval.

> 'Agencies like these have two different mentalities; they have a welfare mentality – you give us money – so they're like their clients; and there are other agencies that see what's on the political agenda and they think, well we could make a real difference here if we start to push our barrow and say, "Could you fund this?" And we've gone from the welfare mentality to something that's quite different. And a lot of Aboriginal agencies now are shifting away from that and seeing you have to be proactive rather than sit back.'

Being proactive, as indicated above, means developing a well-formed proposal for a certain project, then asking the department to fund it, rather than telling the department that the program is needed, then waiting for the department to take the next step. The department is more likely to see the benefit of the project once the groundwork has been done and the organisation can present a persuasive proposal that is likely to be well received by funding bodies.

> 'Taking the initiative. Doing the hard work. It's easier then to get department on board... We take a maverick approach. When looking at introducing change, we took the stance of just doing it then talking to the department, rather than talking to the department first... I'm sure if we went to the department first we'd still be sitting there ...'

Use the political climate to advantage

Professionals highlighted the importance of understanding the broad political climate that shapes policy direction in the sector in order to be successful when submitting projects for approval.

> 'You've got to read the climate where the government's going. If you don't understand that, you've got no chance of working the system and you're always going to be putting in proposals in and having them get knocked on the head. So you've got to work the gaps.'

Some of the professionals we talked to spoke of the importance of using the political climate to lobby on behalf of certain programs that may be more suited to current political trends.

> 'We've got a progressive minister who's very keen about children in care. Now is the time for us because now there's a bit of a shift and we're flavour of the month and we're trying to take advantage of it.'

Managers also emphasised the importance of pitching project proposals to fit with current funding frameworks in order to get departmental approval, like styling a resume to match the criteria of a job application.

> 'We come up with really good ideas and some of them you can fit into the funding... Not going too far out of the square. It fits into the funding. Fitting it in as such and such... You need to jump.'

Seek expert advice

Another important strategy, particularly for smaller organisations that do not have the resources or staff to do everything themselves, was to seek expert advice on key aspects of proposal development.

One organisation advised that they did not have the management expertise in-house to tender for funds to deliver a certain project, but knew they had the capacity to deliver the project. The manager hired a consultant to provide exper-

tise on the appropriate 'language' to use when writing their expression of interest (EOI) for a project, and they won the tender. The manager described hiring the consultant (seven years prior) as 'the best $1,000 we've ever spent.'

> 'The department said that's the target group. This is what we want. We sat down and brainstormed with a consultant around how I could see that working. And then the consultant helped us develop that EOI package... Wherever possible, the money should be there to try and [hire] a consultant that knows the language... We've got a list of consultants that work in the out-of-home sector. They know all the rules and regulations, they know all the current language. And they're very good to have come on board and to help you write some of those submissions to make sure they focus on what you want. And that's what they can help you with. They can help you rewrite some of those submissions... At that time [using the consultant] worked and we were successful in getting the program. Now I can do it.'

Be transparent in accounting processes

Another issue that was seen as important when applying for funding was having transparent accounting processes.

> 'Transparency in our accounting. That's the main issue about funding. If you can't show that you're accountable, they won't give you anything. We need to have transparency across the whole lot. Be up front about it from the start.'

Build the profile of the organisation or program

> 'We're big on having a voice and not fussed about who hears it and we'll stand up in a meeting and say, "No, I don't agree with that."'

A characteristic of many of the organisations we profiled is that they are respected and influential in the broader community. Many organisational leaders and staff became spokespeople for their organisation, which in turn built the organisation's public profile. They did this by networking with mainstream organisations and Indigenous communities, sitting on committees and speaking to other organisations about the work they do. Strong leadership, having a voice in the mainstream, and getting the community on board were key components of building the profile of the organisation.

Show strong organisational and project leadership

A key strength of the organisations we consulted with was strong, focused leadership. Strong leadership was evident at different 'levels' in the organisations and included chief executive officers, program managers and program coordinators, as well as community members. Leaders had passion, vision and drive, and their motivation to help their people was paramount. One program manager spoke of the approach staff take in relation to their program.

> '[We have a] vision of where we see [the program] heading. We want to spread our wings because we see it could benefit so many people, especially our country communities.'

Strong leaders are able to negotiate with managers of government departments and other organisations, strategise their way through bureaucratic structures, interpret statutory frameworks and departmental policies and procedures, take advantage of the political climate to pitch proposals and negotiate successful funding outcomes for their organisations. In all of the focus groups and interviews we conducted, a strong, effective leader with the skills to network, communicate and inspire others was central to the program or service's success.

Have a voice in the mainstream

Through lobbying, advocating for carers or young people, and speaking at forums and meetings, the cultural awareness of mainstream organisations is enhanced, and the organisation and its staff gain respect and recognition within the broader community.

> 'The hardest part was speaking to a [departmental] Community Service Centre and them not knowing who we were. And over time, because of the advocacy role we played, they're now aware of the role I play. Because if I can't get it settled at a regional level I go state-wide, or national. They pay more heed to us now, whereas before they shut the door in your face.'

One metropolitan organisation that provides support services for young people discussed how, by making links with the metropolitan police and speaking to their staff, they built effective relationships with the police officers. In turn, these police officers were able to communicate more effectively with the young people that they dealt with on a daily basis, thereby improving outcomes for Indigenous young people who come to the attention of the police.

> 'We have a really strong relationship with the police where they've wanted to sign Memorandum of Understandings with us and we go and train the police up on cultural understanding and working with young people and it's made such a difference. A lot of the police now are learning and they're not so in the kids' faces and it's made a real difference.'

Another organisation discussed how new changes to the legislation in their jurisdiction meant that the child protection intake process now includes an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander representative when a notification is received about concerns for the safety of an Indigenous child. This has shaped how child protection workers case manage Indigenous children.

> 'Being part of the [consultation] process. Before [Indigenous consultants] there were no representations on that [forum] about care of our children or consultations. The biggest change is having a voice at that forum. It's made a difference giving them the community and cultural background, where it's coming from and why.'

Get the community on board

For many organisations, consulting with Elders and community leaders in the establishment phase about a program's scope was seen as essential if the program was to be successful. Program managers sought input from community members as to what type of service the community needed and how they would like the service to run. Professionals told us that when the community is consulted, community members are more likely to feel a sense of ownership over the program, and less likely to be dissatisfied with the program's services. When asked about how they got the community on board, one participant responded:

> 'I approached the Elders and involved them... And they become part of it and they'd say, "We'd like to sit on your advisory [board]." And in the Aboriginal community, if we're doing a good job, then everybody knows about it.'

However, some organisations found it difficult to balance the submission criteria and tight time frames imposed on them by funding bodies when submitting an expression of interest with the time it takes to consult broadly with communities.

> 'We did go around to all the [communities] and meet with all the area managers and [departmental staff] and some of the local community people there. It would have been good to bring community members together more on a regular basis... You get caught up in the processes and the bureaucratic stuff and you forget the on-ground stuff. That's what we missed. We were strong enough and grounded enough to [get the program up and running without extensive community consultation] but if it was a new service... and we didn't have the high level of skills it would be too easy to lose that part... But the more the community is involved, they own it and less chance of complaints.'

2. Service delivery

The organisations profiled are successful primarily because they meet the needs of the communities, carers and children to whom they provide services. Their methods of service delivery had several characteristics in common. They:

- Operated within the organisation's core business;
- Had a collaborative staffing structure;
- Offered a comprehensive service;
- Empowered communities, carers and young people.

Identify the organisation's core business

Many of the successful organisations and programs we profiled had undertaken a process of review or evaluation, and this enabled them to refocus their service delivery and identify what their organisation's core business should be. These organisations only took on new business when it contributed to their core business objectives, and operated within the parameters of funding allocations in order to run successful programs and provide effective services.

Use reviews and evaluations as an opportunity to review practice

Many professionals said that the process of review was a driver for their organisation or program team to identify what their core business should be and focus on the best ways to deliver services within the scope of their funding and resources. Many participants told us the process of review and restructure led to a clarity and focus around their business strategies, which in turn led to more efficient and effective ways of delivering their services to clients.

> 'Our [Chief Executive Officer] basically drove the whole process, turned the organisation upside down and gave it a shake and pointed it in the right direction. It's a vastly different organisation now. And we see that in the outcomes for the kids. We've got a lot stronger focus on what we actually do... [Before we were] doing a bit of this and a bit of that and we weren't really doing anything that well because we were doing bits of everything.'

Take on new business if it adds to core business

Some managers we spoke to emphasised the need for organisations to only take on extra business if it enhanced what they were already doing. There was a concern that by taking on new business that was outside the scope of their core business, it would detract from the organisation's capacity to provide a quality service.

The manager of the one training organisation, who headed the organisation's restructure, talked about an approach to taking on new business that did not detract from performing their core business as well as possible:

> 'We didn't want to take on anything else until we had got what we were doing really well bedded down and that we were doing it really well and that anything else that we took on didn't impact on our core business or take away from it. So other things that we're doing that we've taken on really add value... We're probably leading the way in the state at the moment [in carer training] – which is unusual for an Indigenous organisation.'

Operate within the parameters of funding allocations

A main reason given for the importance of focusing service delivery on core business was to ensure the organisation or program was operating within the parameters of funding. The manager of an organisation that provides support services for carers mentioned how important it was for organisations to ensure that the services they are providing are in line with their funding allocation:

> 'Organisations need to streamline their service area and they need to be very clear on what it is that they are providing and make sure that that's married to the money they receive to provide that service. And they need to stay within the parameters of that. They should not operate outside that because bad decisions are made and kids feel the impact of that.'

A benefit of re-aligning organisational activities was that they enabled managers to provide a clearer direction for staff around the parameters of their program's funding.

> 'Staff are very motivated since the restructure... Self-determining practice around making their own decisions, creating how to do it themselves. Staff are really empowered... I don't tell people how to do things. I say, "This is what we're funded for. This is how much. You tell me what you think will work and I'll sign off on it."'

Have a collaborative staffing structure so staff feel empowered

> 'It wouldn't work if you didn't have good staff, top to bottom.'

An essential way in which successful organisations operated was that they had a relatively flat organisational structure in which skilled, committed staff members operated in a collaborative manner, taking a teamwork approach. Program managers generally had autonomy over the development and implementation of their programs, and felt valued and empowered. The teamwork approach taken by the organisation allowed staff to contribute to the broader aims of the organisation.

Hire skilled, committed Indigenous staff

Another essential component of effective organisations and programs was having skilled, committed Indigenous staff, where possible. Managers told us they take care to hire the right person for the role, who ideally has the skills and experience necessary to do the job. Alternatively, the organisation provides ongoing training to enable staff to develop these skills as they grow into their role. Some professionals said that they acknowledge the value of their staff by paying them appropriately or, for other organisations where funding is limited, with benefits such as access to ongoing training, professional development opportunities, or support to get educational qualifications relative to their position.

Often staff bring unique skills to the organisation, including knowledge of how to work with bureaucracies, as well as expertise in their specific field. The skills and knowledge staff members bring generally complement those of other staff members, which in turn enhances the organisation's capacity for staff to work as a team to deliver a quality service. Like good leaders, staff members are motivated and passionate about their work.

> 'Most of us here are here because we have a passion. We do so well because we want to work with our communities and the problems they're dealing with affect our families.'

The end result for organisations in ensuring staff feel empowered, valued and acknowledged, is that staff feel a sense of ownership over the programs they are involved with and maintain high standards regarding the quality of the work they and their colleagues are doing.

> 'What makes it work is people. The staff have expectations of themselves and of colleagues. They're self-managing. The quality assurance [of the program] comes from the staff.'

Take a teamwork approach

Successful organisations take a collaborative teamwork approach with staff. Staff feel valued and have input into the organisation's decision-making processes, which in turn brings cohesiveness to the organisation and stability to staffing arrangements. The organisation is strengthened by drawing on the capacities of skilled staff, who in turn feel valued when their contributions are recognised.

> '[The success of the program] was a whole agency approach. Drawing from the experience and skills and knowledge and different backgrounds and qualifications of everyone in the agency. And that's been our strength in that the things that we do in here, it's a real team approach, it doesn't have to be specific to one area; everyone can jump in and lend a hand, and everyone's opinion is valued as well.'

The benefits of having a collaborative workforce is that staff can contribute to the development of a project, thereby maintaining momentum and interest when staff are overloaded with other responsibilities. In one organisation where there are not enough staff to work full-time developing a specific project, keeping a project on the weekly team meeting is a way of keeping the project moving forward:

> 'Each Thursday we have a training and development afternoon and we put [the program] as part of these sessions and it was really good the conversation it generated. Stuff that came from other staff who are not connected with this project... You've got day-to-day work but always good to have one thing you take ownership of and develop. So when I started managing our care area, each worker was given a portfolio and this was a portfolio of one of the workers. So that's how we got the team and the worker involved, because at each meeting they had to report back on what they had done on the project to move it on further.'

In many of the organisations we profiled, staff have autonomy over the creation and implementation of their programs. When issues or problems arise, this is addressed in a manner that strengthens the project and draws on skills and knowledge from other staff members.

> 'Staff are responsible for the creation of their own programs. If it's not working, there's no negativity. I'll say, "This isn't working well" and we'll have a brainstorming, "Does anyone know why?" We have a happy workplace. We're a whole team and we support each other even though we're working on different programs.'

Offer a comprehensive service

> '[It's about] the community telling us how we can assist them, not the other way around.'

The successful programs and organisations we profiled had a clear idea of what their core business was, but within this framework offered a comprehensive service to clients. They did this by drawing on community knowledge to guide their service delivery, responding to the needs of carers, children and young people as they arose, advocating on their behalf when necessary and being available and supportive.

Draw on community knowledge

Professionals advised that drawing on community knowledge is an essential component of service delivery. Professionals rely on community leaders to provide direction on how to best meet the needs of the community. Professionals told us that consulting with community leaders on a regular basis was a way of keeping them abreast of issues, as community leaders are alerted to problems as they arise.

> 'All of these things are how can we lift that program. If we see a lot of children witnessing domestic violence in the [community] meetings, [that tells us] we need more information sessions or more training about that issue in the community. So that's sort of a measurement.'

Know your target client group

Another point raised by the professionals was the importance of knowing their client group well enough to be able to target services appropriately. In one training organisation, the program manager emphasised the importance of taking a carer-centred approach rather than imposing an organisational understanding of what training is important:

> 'It needs to remain carer-focused. Not just what you perceive to be what they require and how they need to have it delivered, but knowing your carers.'

Take a needs-based approach to service delivery

Successful programs take a 'needs-based' approach to service delivery by using requests for support and services from carers or young people as a way of informing them of what kind of services to provide.

The manager of one service arranges for training by the department using the same 'needs-based' principle:

> 'Training for our carers is needs-based. They sit together at the end of the month and say "These are the issues we need to address and we need training in this. Not what's on the [department's] calendar coming up in June. It could have some relevance but right now what we need is training in this." Needs-based training; not set out on an agenda but happens because of a need, which is the way training should be.'

Advocate for carers and young people

Another aspect of offering a comprehensive service to carers and young people is advocating on their behalf when there is conflict with departmental staff.

> 'We're like the buffer between the department and our carers, so our carers basically come through us... and we deal with the liaising with the department. They don't liaise with the department because we've found that that's fraught with difficulty... As much as the department is case managing the kids, we certainly hold them to account on a lot of these issues. We follow up and follow up, and follow up. Often you need to more than once or twice... Carers who don't have the support of an agency just don't have the energy levels to keep continually fighting what they see as a battle. But that's what we get paid to do.'

Be available and responsive

A manager whose training program provides broader carer support is aware of the importance of availability and responsiveness when addressing carer concerns and ensures staff are available to respond quickly to requests for assistance. When asked if there was anything else the service did to support carers, the manager replied:

> 'It's a whole range of things. It's responding to their needs, really... We can respond if there's a crisis with a child. We can respond to that fairly quickly. We're never too far away on the telephone, We're available after hours, weekends, that sort of thing. The carers know that they've got that support.'

Empower the community, carers and young people

> 'The program is developed and run by Aboriginal people, for Aboriginal people.'

Another important characteristic of many of the organisations that we profiled was that they have developed strategies to strengthen their communities, and the carers and young people they provide services to, so that they feel more empowered. They do this by skilling up community members and clients with relevant knowledge and skills, which gave them the confidence to be able to address issues with departments or the children in their care more effectively. They also facilitate knowledge sharing by bringing carers or young people together so they can learn from each other's experiences.

> 'We're very much an agency that develops programs and tries to hand them over to communities. We become mentors and start to move away.'

Skill up communities, carers and young people

Another important way in which organisations empower their communities, carers and young people is by providing them with knowledge and skills so that they can feel more equipped and confident to engage effectively with others, such as departmental workers or in managing the challenging behaviours of the children in their care. A regional organisation that services and supports remote communities advised:

> '[The organisation is] always thinking about bettering our own people. Giving them a career path... Educating the community about what we're seeing on this side and then going out and saying: "This is what you can do in your community."... So it's training up the community workers and the community with all the skill and knowledge that we've learned as workers. That skill and knowledge stays in the community and is passed on to other workers. Because the main focus is looking after the kids.'

An important aspect of skilling up communities, carers and young people is providing them with information that enables them to be more independent and confident in their role. One training organisation links carers to local services so they can feel they have 'ownership' over their caring experience:

> 'We try to skill them up a bit – we still want them to be in contact with us and we still want to discuss issues with them – but to give them more confidence to deal with some of the challenging behaviours that kids present with these days... That's about forging links within the local communities, with parenting programs, holiday activities with children, so that they can take a bit of ownership over their carer experience as well.'

Facilitate knowledge sharing

Another way in which organisations empower communities, carers and young people is by bringing people together with others who have similar issues or interests (such as in training sessions and support groups). One departmental training program run by their Indigenous Unit talked about the benefit of having Elders talk at training sessions about their experiences of past welfare practices, and how this inspired others to want to care for Indigenous children:

> 'One of the things we felt was important [in delivering culturally relevant training] was having an Aboriginal Elder or community member talk to other Aboriginal potential carers about their past experiences of policies and practices. If they were removed themselves, to talk about that. We focus on life stories because they are very powerful... People really enjoyed the personal, one-on-one experience [with a speaker] and having that history from the Elders... As Aboriginal people... they were already aware of [the issues]. It reinforced things they already had known... that we had to take some of that responsibility on and be carers. It empowered them... They felt valued and felt they had to be carers to help Aboriginal kids... So there's that mind shift of, "We actually need to be doing stuff too, it can't be just the department or other agencies."'

Through sharing stories and experiences with others, people feel strengthened and supported by being connected to a larger group.

> '[Carer] group members have had experiences such as dealing with the education department, and can share their experiences of how to go about doing this with other carers who are having similar problems.'

A training organisation invited experienced carers to training sessions for new carers to discuss their caring experiences. In these sessions, trainers and carers acknowledge and reinforce the knowledge and skills carers already have, which helps carers feel valued and respected.

> ‘Opportunities to bring our carers together gives them the opportunity to share information, but also they don’t think that the problem that they’re facing they’re alone with that. There’s support as well. An opportunity to provide support... We acknowledge our carers’ experiences and their input and that what they’ve got to share with other carers is valued. And it’s important because I think that’s a big thing... you hear other carers... their input is not valued.’

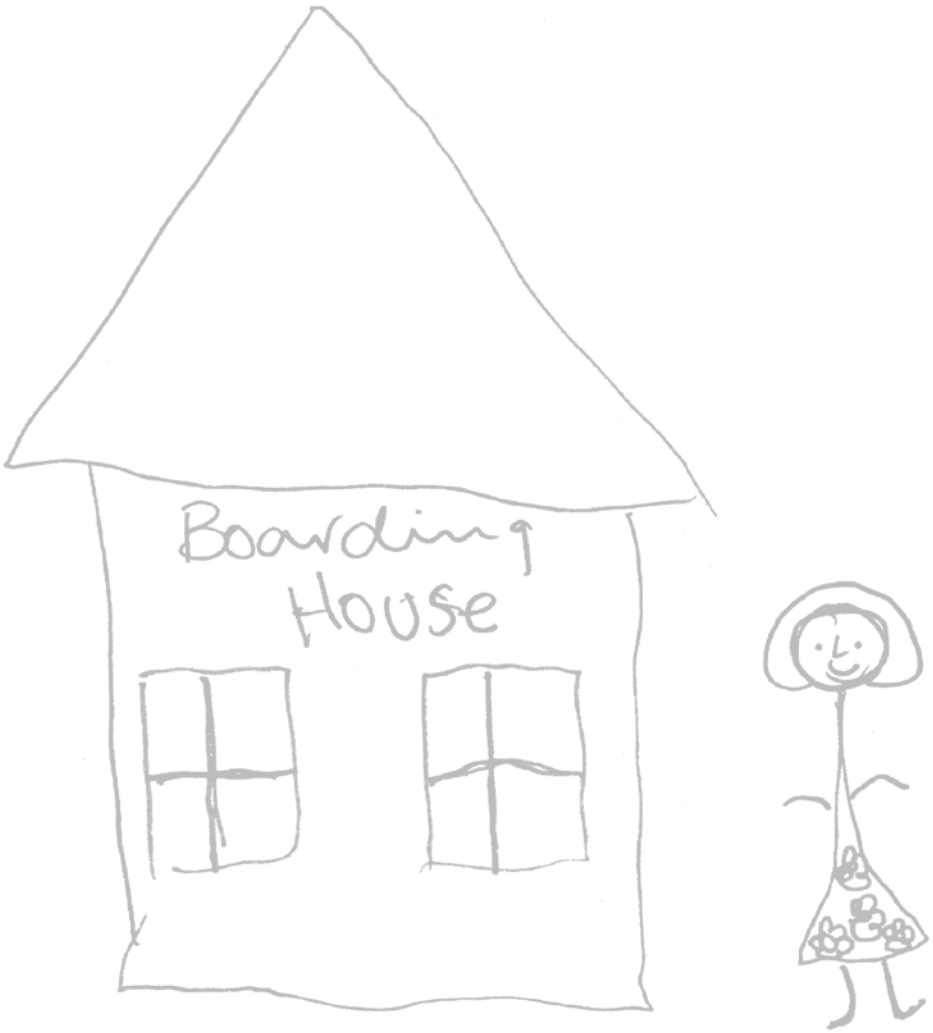
The benefit of bringing people together to share knowledge and experiences is that they feel supported and understand they are not alone in the problems they may be facing. Significantly, they feel valued for the knowledge and skills they have gained and are able to pass on to others.

Conclusion

A common characteristic of the organisations profiled was that they take a ‘ground up’ rather than a ‘top down’ approach to service development and delivery. Their service provision is driven by the ongoing needs of their communities, carers, children and young people. This was true for carer support programs, training programs and programs that supported children and young people in care.

Professionals also spoke of the importance to them of strengthening and empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and most programs we profiled incorporated strategies to achieve this. The successful organisations that we profiled had similar management styles. They had strong leadership; were clear on what their core business was and operated within the boundaries of this, and took a collaborative, teamwork approach with staff within a flat organisational structure.

Successful managers told us that developing strong relationships with external stakeholders was the key to getting the department or other organisations on board to fund or approve projects. An outcome of establishing effective relationships with stakeholders was that staff became spokespeople for their organisation in the wider community. The organisation and its staff become known to external stakeholder groups, which in turn may increase their profile and influence. This has the benefit for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of introducing more culturally appropriate ways of addressing child protection and out-of-home care issues, as well as bringing more cultural awareness into the mainstream Australian community. The programs and services profiled in booklets 2, 3 and 4 demonstrate these characteristics.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