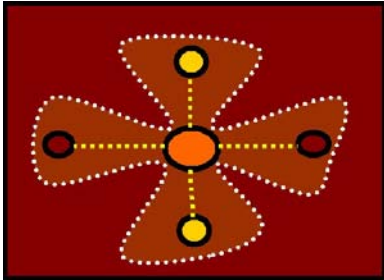


Best Practice Working with Aboriginal Communities

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**ABORIGINAL
&
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER
HACC ACCESS PROJECT**

**Your Link To Local Aged &
Disability Care Services**



Artwork by: Jason Simes ©

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BEST PRACTICE

WORKING WITH ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

Introduction

Much is made of our differences. The divide between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people sometimes seems too great to conquer. Yet conquer it we will, not by denying our differences, but by celebrating them.

At the NSW Aboriginal Land Council, they are committed to preserving our traditional culture and heritage, while at the same time helping our people survive, indeed thrive, in a modern world.

What we need is greater understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. Our people have little choice but to engage with modern white society. In the interest of fairness and in a spirit of friendship, we ask that non-Aboriginal Australians meet us half way.

NSW Aboriginal Land Council – Vision Statement

“...to liberate and empower Aboriginal people in New South Wales through economic and social independence...”

As the State’s peak representative body in indigenous affairs, the NSW Aboriginal Land Council aims to protect the interests and further the aspirations of its members and the broader Aboriginal community.

NSW has Australia’s largest indigenous populations, with over 135,000 Aboriginal people living within the NSW borders. Its Aboriginal communities are diverse, ranging from urban to rural and remote, and from modern to traditional in their beliefs and practices.

It is proof of our pride and strength that we have survived against the odds and that our culture is still very much alive.

We have survived! But the struggle continues. Now we fight for recognition of our living culture and our rights and the freedom to fulfil our traditional duties and responsibilities as the first peoples of this land.

SERVICE POLICY PRINCIPLES CULTURAL AWARENESS OBJECTIVES

1) ACCESS:

Until recently Aboriginal access to home and community care services has been severely restricted. This has led to the perception, in Aboriginal communities, that HACC services are only available to for non-Aboriginal people. It is also the case that many Aboriginal people, are not aware that these home support services exists.

Historically, Aboriginal people have been mistreated by welfare services for example children were forcibly removed from their families by an oppressive welfare system. Many Aboriginal people associate modern community service providers with the oppressive system of the past. For many Aboriginal people assessments generate a great deal of anxiety impacts adversely on the amount and type of information people are willing to provide, consequently impacting on the outcome of an assessment.

As a result of their past experience with welfare services Aboriginal people are often fearful of community service providers which lead them to request simple non-threatening home support services such as lawn mowing and general housekeeping.

Also, in many communities there are a number of strong taboos relating to personal care and hygiene and these taboos may be a barrier to requesting personal care. (For example, restrictions placed on who may care for an elder because of age and gender or family relationship.

2) SERVICE PROVISION:

A culturally appropriate service is one, which recognizes and respects the cultural characteristics of the members of the community it serves. No two Aboriginal communities are exactly alike. Different groups of Aboriginal people have different cultural beliefs and traditional practices. These beliefs and practices must be recognized and respected by service providers wishing to successfully access the Aboriginal community.

Self-determination is a critical issue for Aboriginal people. Self-determination encompasses a person's right to make choices and decisions regarding their own lives. Historically, this right has been denied to Aboriginal people whose lives were controlled by "protective" welfare legislation and policies. Aboriginal people are now striving for self-determination in all aspects of their lives and this has a significant impact on access and service delivery.

Maintaining close links with family and community members is a major cultural obligation of Aboriginal people. Also, many Aboriginal Elders have important family and community responsibilities and obligations.

3) CONSULTATION AND INFORMATION:

Consultation is essential for self-determination because it allows Aboriginal customers to participate as fully as possible in service provision decision-making processes.

Historically, Aboriginal people have been excluded from participating in mainstream educational processes. This has made it difficult, particularly for elder Aboriginal people, to acquire formal English language skills.

Publicity and marketing material, which is Aboriginal specific is an effective means of increasing awareness of service availability. Historically, Aboriginal people have been excluded from accessing community services rendering ineffective generalist publicity material.

WHY ABORIGINAL PEOPLE DON'T ACCESS MAINSTREAM HACC SERVICES?

- Aboriginal history has developed a strong mistrust of government departments and institutions.
- The authoritarian nature from the previous welfare system leads to a feeling of intimidation.
- Many Aboriginal people feel embarrassed about non-Aboriginal services coming into their homes. Puts pressure on our people, and causes unnecessary concern/anxiety.
- Caring in Aboriginal communities is a cultural obligation and many Aboriginal people rely on the extended family to give help and support when caring for our elders and disabled family members.
- Aboriginal people do not focus on a person's disability and believe that caring is a community responsibility, where we look after each other.
- Aboriginal people prefer to receive services from Aboriginal workers who are accepted by the whole family unit. (Community factions are a major hindrance in service delivery to Aboriginal clients).
- Many Aboriginal people have very little knowledge of support services and how to access them. If they do know about services, Aboriginal people prefer to keep much of the caring within the family for as long as possible. Sometimes never seeking assistance or support.
- The lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity of mainstream service providers. This causes conflict between the two groups due to cultural beliefs and policy guidelines.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW WHEN DEVELOPING YOUR SERVICE TO BE MORE CULTURE APPROPRIATE?

- The Aboriginal communities require services that reflect changing needs. Service providers need to be creative in providing services that are open-ended, adaptable and responsive to community direction.
- It is important that although services being offered by service providers need to become more relevant and accessible to Aboriginal people, emphasis should be on community development.
- Service providers need to have faith in the ability of Aboriginal decision-making. This attitude will go a long way to fostering Aboriginal autonomy.
- History has been a major contributor to Aboriginal communities' distrust of authoritarian government departments. There is a fear that information provided to any mainstream worker will be shared between departments or used against them?
- Mainstream workers need to invest time in building a relationship with Aboriginal clients if they are to gain their trust? Trust needs to be established before Aboriginal clients will open up about their needs.

HOW DO YOU MAKE YOUR SERVICE MORE ACCEPTABLE TO ABORIGINAL PEOPLE?

- It is not only important for service providers to be able to relate to Aboriginal clients warmly, you have to find a way to get out of your office and go into the Aboriginal communities. Once you're there, and the people like you, then it is time to invite them into your service.
 - It is vital for Aboriginal clients to feel comfortable with you and your surroundings. To do this, service providers need to ensure that all staff are approachable, that Aboriginal faces are amongst the staff, that there is an easy atmosphere and pleasant surroundings.
 - Service providers should support family relationships and utilize informal networks. Recognise and acknowledge that each Aboriginal community is different and that programs are not universal.
 - Be friendly! This will go a long way to helping Aboriginal clients feel less intimidated by the mainstream system or to inadvertently be made to feel inferior if they do not know what to do.
 - If you're thinking of producing Aboriginal specific documentation, it is wise to avoid the use of totems as these may offend some communities. Make every effort to contact the Aboriginal elders group in your area, as they will advise and give approval on what should be used on your service access brochure etc!
- Understand that if a precedent has been set with services, it's very hard to change with new personnel. Aboriginal clients will discontinue a service, if the service delivery plan is interrupted.

USING ABORIGINAL SERVICES & WORKERS AS LINKS?

- Liaise and partner with other Aboriginal services in your local area to access information or setup initial relationships.
- Use Aboriginal workers in your area first. These workers should always be the first point of contact. Invite them in and they will be critical in conveying the idea that the mainstream service providers will do a good job.
- Don't assume that Aboriginal service providers will get immediate access. Aboriginal clients may be suspicious about why an Aboriginal service provider is working for the government.
- Contact the ATSI, HACC, and ACCESS Coordinator situated at the Casino Neighbourhood Centre as a bridge to link Aboriginal people to your service.
- Invite an Aboriginal person to be on the Board of your committee.
- Think through issues of confidentiality and privacy. An Aboriginal client may be related to staff members employed by the Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal service provider, that you want them to access. This may not be appropriate.
- You need to be careful not to put too great an expectation on Aboriginal services and workers, as their clients will also be putting demands on them.

BUREAUCRATIC ISSUES

- Aboriginal people may not understand guidelines/processes for receiving services – this often leads to feeling rejected or judged.
- Aboriginal people often don't know what the acronyms for specific services such as HACC, COPS, or CACP's stand for. Information needs to be distributed in terminology that is easily understandable. Do not make the mistake of being too simplistic or condescending.
- Don't focus on filling in forms. Highlight what questions you must have answered for government requirements and just find out this information. If necessary develop specific forms, eg. CIARR
- Collect your information a bit at a time and as appropriate. Rely on partnerships with other services to get information, too. Make use of the CIARR.
- Don't make things too formal – it may be interpreted as questioning.
- Think through ways of gathering information – assessment procedures can be very alienating.
- Home assessments can be interpreted as judging their home or living standards.

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