

SOUTH WEST ABORIGINAL MEDICAL SERVICE SUBMISSION TO THE AUSTRALIAN
SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON REGIONAL AND REMOTE INDIGENOUS
COMMUNITIES

I acknowledge the land where we meet today, as the traditional land of the Noongar People.

My name is Quenten Jackson and I speak before you today as the Health Services Manager of the South West Aboriginal Medical Service, known as SWAMS. SWAMS is a not for profit, community managed organisation. SWAMS Board of Management is comprised of elected Noongar representatives from each of the different communities throughout the South West Region. SWAMS provides a range of health, social and emotional wellbeing services and Home and Community Care services to the Noongar people throughout the South West Region of Western Australia as well as additional social and emotional wellbeing services to the Noongar people in the Narrogin/Wagin Region. SWAMS' programs are funded by both the West Australian and Federal Governments.

SWAMS welcomes the Senate Inquiry into Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities. It is important to acknowledge that past as well as current government policies continue to impact on the Aboriginal People in this region. The extent of ongoing Aboriginal disadvantage indicates that a number of policies and programs are failing to achieve their intended outcomes.

Aboriginal people in SWAMS service region continue to live with unacceptable levels of:

- poverty;
- chronic health issues;
- unemployment;
- formal education issues;
- accommodation issues including homelessness, overcrowding and unsuitable or poorly maintained housing;
- incarceration and over-representation in the legal justice system;
- family and relationship breakdown;
- harmful use of alcohol and other substances as well as drug and mental health co-morbidity issues;
- Family Violence, community fighting and other violence within the community;
- And untreated mental health issues.

Aboriginal people in this region continue to deal with:

- trauma and grief resulting from past government policies;
- distress associated with past and ongoing physical and sexual abuse;
- despair associated with child apprehension and separation of children from families;
- significant levels of grief associated with the loss of loved ones through suicide and continuing fear about the likelihood of further family and community suicides;
- high levels of anxiety and low levels of Self Esteem
- and ongoing racism and discrimination at a number of levels.

In addition, Aboriginal communities within our region continue to experience:

- the loss of hope and dreams amongst young people, particularly young men;
- a deterioration in Respect relationships within the community;
- a diminishing of men's roles within the family and community;
- a weakening of Elders roles within the family and community;
- a loss of trust in governments, organisations and services;



- a lack of Access to mainstream programs and services.

It would seem that the various government policies, programs and services have not been effective in reducing the disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians in a range of areas. It seems essential for all tiers of Government to work in genuine and respectful partnerships with Aboriginal people with the aim of resolving Aboriginal disadvantage. Long-term positive outcomes for Aboriginal people can occur with committed partnerships at a regional level and flexible models of service delivery that take into account the diversity of Aboriginal communities. It is important to reverse the top-down approach to service delivery and to continue actively working towards restoring confidence and re-building trust between decision makers and Aboriginal communities.

There is a real need for new and different approaches to policy and program development and most importantly, to service implementation. It is vital to ensure that the intent behind the policy development corresponds with the way the policy is implemented at a ground level.

It is vital that governments adopt an integrated and long term planning approach to service delivery including a longer-term funding approach. Services such as ours must instil a sense of confidence and certainty in the community and this can only occur when we are able to adopt a long term planning approach to our service delivery. This is difficult to do unless we are confident that we will be adequately resourced. We need to ensure that we are not setting up unsustainable programs or false expectations within the community.

Over this last twelve months SWAMS has set up a Social and Emotional Wellbeing Program in the Narrogin/Wagin Region in response to a number of suicides in the area and an appeal from the community for accessible and culturally secure services. There has been a strong response to that service with client numbers continuing to grow at a significant rate.

There were a number of issues involved in setting up this program including:

- securing adequate resources to implement and ensure sustainability of the program;
- securing qualified and appropriate staff;
- securing appropriate office and staff accommodation;
- providing appropriate supervision and support for staff, particularly as a main service is located in Bunbury a number of hours away;
- ensuring the safety and wellbeing of the staff;
- and responding appropriately to the high level of need and the complexity and intensity of the issues in the community.

These matters are not unique to this service or this region. Service delivery is reliant on the successful recruitment, training and retention of suitably qualified staff. Recruiting and retaining staff is an ongoing struggle for services in remote and regional areas, particularly suitably qualified health professionals. SWAMS is currently delivering Certificate 3 in Aboriginal Health Worker training in an attempt to increase the number of trained Health Workers in the region. This is the second cohort that SWAMS has put through this training and we believe that this is an effective strategy for building capacity both in our organisation and in the local Noongar Community. In addition, services need to be adequately funded to be able to offer appropriate incentives to professional workers when recruiting for difficult-to-fill positions.

Funding is also often provided for a fixed, short-term period which creates uncertainty at a number of levels. The organisation, staff and community need to feel confident that suitable

and sustainable programs can be planned and implemented in a way that can deliver long term positive outcomes to the community. Organisations also need to be adequately funded to ensure culturally secure service delivery.

This requires, among other things:

- employment of both male and female workers;
- a planned and integrated approach to cultural awareness training (existing cultural barriers cannot be addressed in short, one-off training sessions);
- flexibility of service delivery especially provision for outreach and home visits;
- the employment of Aboriginal staff and Aboriginal consultants;
- partnering with Aboriginal organisations to develop practices and procedures that promote culturally secure service delivery.

One of the major concerns that SWAMS has in relation to the Narrogin program is that we have not been funded to a level that has allowed the employment of both male and female workers. This region is currently serviced by a team comprising a male Social Worker, a male Aboriginal Family Support Worker and an administration support worker. There is a critical need for a qualified female counselor in this region and yet we have been unable to secure funding to recruit a female to that role.

When SWAMS first met with the Narrogin Noongar Community sixteen months ago, lack of accessibility to mainstream services and lack of trust were two key issues that were raised. Community members indicated that they were not receiving services from the existing service providers despite the level of despair within the community. People indicated that they were keen to receive services in their homes and in the community but there was little confidence that this would occur. Community members spoke of feeling reluctant to approach services including the hospital, even in emergency situations. One of SWAMS main objectives was to support the community to overcome barriers that prevented or inhibited access to existing local services. There has been some good shifts, in particular the local hospitals commitment to accessibility and inclusiveness has made a marked difference to Noongar people's willingness to attend the hospital. SWAMS workers have reported that SWAMS clients are being admitted to the hospital for a range of issues including suicidal intent and ideations.

In addition, there have been some good examples of services working towards greater accessibility although this is often reliant on the motivation of individual workers. For instance SWAMS workers report an effective working relationship with a clinical psychologist from the mental health service who has been willing to work out in the community, including providing home visits to Noongar Families. This working relationship has been a very useful strategy for effectively responding to clients with mental health issues.

There are a number of social and economic issues that continue to impact on the health and wellbeing of Noongar families:

- harmful alcohol and other drug use is a major issue in the community. Alcohol and other drug use is often linked to abuse and violence in the community, chronic health issues, poverty, family and relationship breakdown, child neglect, mental health issues and legal justice issues. There is a distinct lack of appropriate, culturally secure responses for alcohol and other drug users in this region. Some Aboriginal families view imprisonment as the only viable option for assisting family members to stop their drug use. Prison is frequently viewed as a 'defacto' residential detoxification and drug rehabilitation centre and families are often desperate to see the drug use stop, even if it means imprisonment

of a loved one. There is a vital need for local residential detoxification and rehabilitation service options which are specifically set up to address the needs of Aboriginal people. There is also a need for appropriately delivered community education to assist families to stop the cycle of alcohol and other drug abuse;

- The protection, safety, health and wellbeing of children continue to be of utmost concern. Many children are regularly exposed to abuse and violence, drug and alcohol use, poverty, neglect, inadequate housing and separation from family. Increasingly, the responsibility for the children rests with the grandmothers or grandparents as drug and alcohol, Family Violence or mental health issues impact on parent's ability to care for their children. There is currently very little support for grandparents who are caring for their grandchildren. Grandparents are struggling to make ends meet often with no additional resources to feed and clothe the children. Our service has worked with grandmothers who are expressing feelings of despair and suicidal ideations. There is a vital need for policies and programs that support and resource grandparents who are fostering or raising up their grandchildren.
- There are still too many Aboriginal children, under the guardianship of the Department of Child Protection (DCP), who do not have access to their Aboriginal family or community. In some instances, siblings are separated from each other as well as their parents, grandparents and extended family members. In some cases there appears to be little resolve to remedy this situation with DCP workers indicating that they do not have adequate resources or staff to ensure children's access to their family, community and culture. It appears that the longer the period of separation, the less likely contact or family reunification is going to occur. There is also a need for effective, culturally secure early intervention programs for vulnerable children, teenagers and families. These are critical issues that need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.
- Bridging the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children's outcomes in education is also an issue that needs to be addressed at every level of government. Children frequently feel alienated in an education system which is based on Western style rather than Aboriginal styles of learning. Aboriginal children are frequently ill prepared for the school system without access to books, computers and uniforms. Many parents continue to associate the school system with negative experiences and it can be difficult for families to see the relevance between formal schooling and the reality of their children's lives. Children's absenteeism and performance often reflects their parent's attitudes and the broader issues that impact on their lives. Some children are compelled to take on the role of carer to their parent or to their other siblings, where there are health, mental health, Family Violence or community conflict issues. The carer role takes priority over schooling. Children also report experiencing conflict and abuse issues at school which they indicate are related to differences in cultural background. Djidi Djidi Aboriginal School in Bunbury is an excellent example of a culturally secure learning environment for Aboriginal Children. Djidi Djidi teaches Noongar language, positively promotes Noongar culture and pride and fosters positive relationships between the school, Noongar families and the wider community. The Clontarf Foundation's Aboriginal Football Academy is also a solid example of an upper school partnership program that fosters school participation, attendance, and retention for Aboriginal students.
- Rates of unemployment continue to be a concern in Aboriginal communities. Paid employment can provide people with an opportunity to move beyond poverty and marginalisation. Paid employment can also bring about a sense of achievement and build

self-esteem. Aboriginal people continue to confront a number of obstacles that prevent them from securing and holding paid employment such as: limited employment opportunities; lack of formal education, limited qualifications and training; lack of general work readiness after years of unemployment; lack of transport, no driver's licence and significant financial and social issues. For many, the loss of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) was a distressing blow. CDEP did provide people with a sense of purpose, positive social interactions, a sense of pride and achievement and an opportunity to develop skills. There is a need for Governments, in partnership with non-government organisations and corporations, to play a key role in providing a range of support options, including employment opportunities, job specific literacy and numeracy education, hands-on skills based training and mentoring to assist Aboriginal people to develop work readiness and to secure and maintain paid employment.

- Access to safe and well maintained housing is a key determinant of health and wellbeing. The main accommodation issues of concern in SWAMS' service region include:
 - homelessness and overcrowding due to shortage of public housing;
 - the length of wait lists – in some areas people wait several years before being offered a house;
 - the length of Priority Housing lists;
 - men's lack of access to housing – there seems to be a perception that men can simply move in with their mother, sister or female cousin;
 - lack of access to appropriate, culturally secure accommodation for the aged including appropriate supported accommodation;
 - Aboriginal people being grouped or concentrated into particular public housing areas or suburbs – often on the very outskirts of towns;
 - Aboriginal people's lack of access to the private rental market as a result of discriminatory practices;
 - lack of opportunity for home ownership – people spend their whole life paying rent in the public housing system.

Aboriginal people need a time and support to heal. The Redress process has served to open deep and painful wounds for many Aboriginal people. Instead of providing an opportunity for building trust and goodwill, the State Government's cut-back on payments has perpetuated feelings of mistrust and resentment. The issue of Stolen Wages also remains unresolved. Aboriginal people need to feel valued and respected and have access to their culture, to traditional sites and to places where they can safely gather to heal, foster healthy relationships and feelings of self worth and to strengthen culture and community pride.

Governments and organisations need to remain accountable to Aboriginal people and to work towards building trust, respect and goodwill. SWAMS hopes that this inquiry leads to new approaches and positive outcomes for Aboriginal People.