

LOCAL COMMISSIONER DEVELOPMENT WEEK



Development week

Every year the Commission facilitates a Local Commissioner Development Week in Cairns where the Commissioners participate in various activities with Commission staff. The agenda is nominated and approved by the Commissioners, and they and attending staff are provided with a combination of training and networking activities including but not limited to:

- specific training in areas identified and requested by the Local Commissioners
- meetings with senior officers of government departments and agencies who provide service delivery in their communities followed by question and answer sessions
- opportunities to network with organisations who provide social services
- updates on Commission procedures and processes
- presentations from physical and mental health professionals
- participation in workshops to address common issues, review strategies and source solutions.



Coen Local Coordinator Amy Barden, Aurukun Commissioner Dorothy Pootchemunka and Mossman Gorge Local Coordinator Sandi Rye

The 2014 development week commenced on 5 May 2014 with a welcome from Commissioner Glasgow. In his welcome Commissioner Glasgow acknowledged the increased respect shown to the Local Commissioners within and outside of their communities which has enhanced Indigenous authority in the CYWR communities. He thanked them for the dedication they had each shown during the year and encouraged them as a group to consider future planning incorporating sensible, practical and economically viable initiatives. Commissioner Glasgow particularly asked each Local Commissioner present to consider whether there was anything within the framework of the FRC Act that they would like to see altered to create greater efficiencies, and asked that each consider how they may be able to make their community members more responsive to change. Commissioner Glasgow's welcome, asking all to consider the future and in what direction they would like the Commission to evolve, set the theme for the 2014 development week.

Presentations

Several government departments joined with the Local Commissioners during the week to discuss issues relevant to the CYWR communities. The Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services presented an outline of the department's role in ensuring the safety and protection of vulnerable children. The protocols and processes followed when intervention occurs with Indigenous children were outlined, together with the department's commitment to ensuring that Indigenous children are cared for in culturally appropriate ways when in care. A question and answer session followed with the Local Commissioners seeking clarification on issues of access to safety houses, reunification processes and whether the Commission could work collaboratively with Child Safety officers in their conferencing



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processes to provide a more holistic community driven approach. The Local Commissioners stressed the need for continuously engaging at the local level with the community to focus on proactive preventative strategies.

Representatives from the Mental Health and Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drugs Service (ATODS) and the Cape York Hospital and Health Service reflected with the Commissioners on the extent of cannabis use in the Cape communities and the relationship between mental health and the use of cannabis. Local Commissioners asked what range of resources they could access to increase community awareness of the damaging effects of cannabis and other drugs, and how they could scale up early detection and intervention. The possibility of collaborating with ATODS to provide training in motivational interviewing techniques would enable the Local Commissioners to target those people who wish to stop their drug use. The importance of redefining the lines in service provision and the need to use innovative approaches in service delivery was acknowledged in order to initiate preventative rather than reactive programs.

A representative from Centrelink together with three of the Centrelink Remote Service Team attended the conference to conduct a question and answer session with Commissioners based upon the BasicsCard, ABSTUDY and remote visiting. Centrelink processes and the impact of those processes on community members who are income managed or on ABSTUDY, together with the impact of funeral attendance on education were deliberated on during the discussions.

Concluding day one of the development week was a comprehensive consultation conducted between those attending the development week and delegates from Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Multicultural Affairs (DATSIMA), the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Institute. A self-evaluation of welfare reform and the Commission was undertaken. Questions raised for discussion were: what have the benefits been for the CYWR communities; what has worked; what has not worked; and where do we go from here. The need to develop a vision for the future was identified with an acknowledgement that there are now many people looking to the Commission for new initiatives. The general consensus of those present at the workshop was that the CYWR trial had resulted in:

- safer communities
- improved educational opportunities and
- healthier children
- increased pride in the communities with positive changes being visually evident.
- improved school attendance

On day two of the development week Fiona Jose, Chief Executive Officer of the Institute, visited to acquaint the Local Commissioners on the Empowered Communities project. Empowered Communities is a joint project between Indigenous leaders from eight regions across Australia, the Australian Government, State Governments and Jawun Indigenous Corporate Partnerships. The project seeks to draft a “customised and coordinated” governance model for the regions to better enable local Indigenous leadership. There has historically been a large number of diverse programs and agencies that drive initiatives



Bryce Coxall FRC, Fiona Jose CEO the Institute, Jo Dennert Parenting Team Leader Cape York Partnerships and Mark Dennert Operations Manager Cape York Partnerships

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in Indigenous communities across Australia and Empowered Communities aims to not only coordinate how these initiatives are implemented, but also to set government policy in dealing with Indigenous affairs and to drive policy informed by Indigenous leaders. Fiona Jose informed the Local Commissioners that the FRC is considered “the greatest success and the highest watermark” of the CYWR trial.

Across the four CYWR communities, the Local Commissioners have a common concern in regard to juvenile crime. Of

particular interest to the Local Commissioners, therefore, was a meeting with Detective Senior Sergeant Glen Horan, His Honour Magistrate Trevor Black and senior staff of the Remote Youth Justice Service Centre. Police officers are working with Child Safety in an endeavour to place juveniles into safe environments, re-engage them with education and keep them away from drugs and violence. Senior Sergeant Horan informed those present on the general background of youth who become involved in crime. One commonality



Mr Gordon Dean, Raymond Lennox Hope Vale Local Coordinator and His Honour Trevor Magistrate Black

in these youth is that they all have a significant past history, with contact already made with the Queensland Police Service (QPS) and Child Safety. This contact with the authorities, violence in the family home and a lack of parental supervision desensitises them to violence. Other commonalities are substance abuse, disengagement from education and negative peer association. Of primary importance to the QPS in dealing successfully with juvenile crime is getting families on-board to take responsibility for the actions of their children.

Magistrate Black has been a Magistrate in North Queensland since 1980, mostly in Indigenous communities. Magistrate Black informed the Local Commissioners that Magistrates now have improved engagement with Indigenous communities and a better understanding of what drives people to offend. He spoke of how sentencing options are exercised for juveniles and what factors are taken into account. Unfortunately once a juvenile has been sentenced to detention, it is easier for them to return to detention. The Commissioners were advised that it is vitally important that Elders engage with the Courts to get a better understanding of the justice system and that history has shown that an efficiently functioning community justice group is the most effective strategy to tackle crime.

The Remote Youth Justice Service Centre offers programs for young people in contact with the youth justice system. The programs make young offenders responsible for their actions and work to reintegrate them into their families and the community. They conduct community conferencing which is on a referral system from the QPS. Of particular interest to the Local Commissioners was the possibility of training to perform mediation and community conferencing on behalf of Youth Justice. The Commissioners advised that very often time is of the essence in mediation and/or conferencing; they have an in-depth knowledge of their communities and the families who live in their communities; and would be well placed to meet the challenge.



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Conference delegates next listened to a presentation by Mike Fordham and Anne-Marie Roberts from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Schools Youth and Evidence Division, Remote Attendance Strategies Taskforce. The presentation outlined the Australian Government's Remote Schools Attendance Strategy which is aimed at getting more Indigenous children in remote areas back to school from the start of term 1 2014. The strategy commenced in 40 remote communities in the Northern Territory, Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia. It now operates in 73 schools in 69 communities where school attendance has been low, in some instances as low as 40 percent. Local Commissioners identified strongly with the strategy which was largely influenced by the operations of the Commission.

The Remote School Attendance Strategy is part of a range of strategies supported by the Australian Government to improve school attendance. The Council of Australian Governments which includes all states and territories has agreed a new school attendance Closing the Gap target. The new target is to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance in five years. COAG agreed that each state and territory is to monitor Indigenous students' attendance rates in schools where they are below 80 percent and develop strategies to improve attendance.

Following presentations from the Department of Housing and Public Works, and the Cairns Regional Domestic Violence Service, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service (ATSILS) addressed the conference on estate, debt, child safety, family law and domestic violence issues.

After meeting with the above government agencies and service providers the Local Commissioners agreed that with the information provided and comprehensive discussions undertaken, not only were they returning to their communities with a greater understanding of service provision and service provider capability, but the week had also provided them with the opportunity to strengthen their working relationships.

Networking

Throughout the development week Local Commissioners and staff visited various community organisations including Red Cross, Djarragun Enterprises and Mookai Rosie Bi-Bayan. Each of these organisations provides Indigenous health and support services to the Cape communities.



Cairns Wellbeing Centre

Red Cross has been providing services to the Indigenous communities for 60 years and has recently opened their new Wellbeing Centre.

The centre provides accommodation to clients utilising medical services in Cairns including oncology and renal services.

Ninety-six percent of the people utilising the new Wellbeing Centre are Indigenous people from the Cape, Torres Straits and remote western areas. Due to the high rate of Indigenous clientele, the centre was traditionally blessed to make clients feel safe and comfortable. A holistic

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engagement of the client's health needs is provided including the provision of recreational and cultural activities. Community consultation informed the final building structure and communal facilities.

Mookai Rosie By-Bayan has been operating for over 30 years and provides an accommodation base for women travelling to Cairns primarily for child maternal health and pregnancy support. Their function is to increase health and wellbeing whilst providing culturally appropriate accommodation. Health workers offer health education including breastfeeding and nutrition, counselling and playgroup coordination. The centre also offers respite for mothers, their children and female relatives.

Djarragun Enterprises links Indigenous male students from Far North Queensland and the Torres Straits with employment opportunities. Pastoral support is offered together with personal development, financial guidance and social and professional mentoring.

A tour of each of the above facilities was conducted and the Local Commissioners engaged in discussions with senior staff to identify common issues, seek solutions and familiarise themselves with the support offered outside of their communities.

Of special significance during the development week was a day trip to Hope Vale. Local Commissioners and Commission staff were hosted by the Hope Vale Local Commissioners and received a traditional welcome upon arrival from traditional owner and Elder Mr Herman Bambie. Shirley Costello, a respected local community member, then welcomed the special guests with a history of the Hope Vale community. Shirley Costello is a Thiithaarr-warra woman from the Guugu Yimithirr tribe, and is committed to assisting local people to learn, and to keep the local Guugu Yimithirr history and language alive. Visitors were given a guided tour of the Hope Vale FRC office, business precinct, Council, St John's Lutheran Church, CYAAA (where direct instruction classes were observed), Multi-Purpose Centre and Hope Vale Arts and Cultural Centre. The children of Hope Vale then performed a traditional dance and the FRC 'Adopt-a-class' thanked the visitors with letters of appreciation and showed examples of their school work.

The Hope Vale Banana Farm was visited next where farm workers met with the Commission and advised that unfortunately most of them had lost their jobs due to the destruction caused by Cyclone Ita. All displayed a resilience to the work of Mother Nature and discussed what was required to re-establish the farm to its previous level of production. The Hope Vale community is strongly committed to their own economic development and are shouldering the responsibility to implement a quick recovery for the farm in order to provide certainty for its workers and the community.



Devastation caused by Cyclone Ita to the Hope Vale Banana Farm



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Outcomes

The Local Commissioners from each community in turn addressed the delegates during the week and summarised the outcomes from their communities, reviewing their successes and failures, weaknesses and strengths. Together they identified current challenges, celebrated their successes and determined future priorities. As a starting point the Commissioners considered what would happen if the CYWR trial ended.

In summary the Commissioners would like more responsibility. They have the strength to expand on their skills and would like to further assist the community in other capacities.

Commissioners expressed concern that visitors can enter community and cause disturbances, yet cannot be dealt with as they do not fall within the Commission's jurisdiction. In order to close what they view as a gap in reforming behaviour they would like to see the FRC Act amended to delete the requirement of three months residency in determining jurisdiction. They would like the Commission to have jurisdiction over any welfare recipient as long as they live in a house in the community. In essence all people in community should adopt the community's values.

Mental health issues in young people were of grave concern, and assistance for young people is still very lacking and much needed, particularly for those engaged in drug and alcohol abuse and for those that have suffered prolonged domestic violence.

Aurukun, Coen, Hope Vale and Mossman Gorge Commissioners all expressed the view that their communities were "starting to turn", but they need an incentive to carry the momentum of change, be that training, apprenticeships or employment. New initiatives are required to increase economic growth and sustainability and a forum is needed to hear, consider and act upon the initiatives.

There are real concerns for juvenile offending in the communities, and a perception of a loss of control. Despite the numerous programs and strategies in place by various government departments and agencies to deal with juvenile crime, crime is continuing and escalating both in costs to the community in financial terms and in costs to the community in social terms. The Commissioners would like to exercise more influence over these problem youth, and over the parents/carers who cannot, or will not, control their children.

Although there is a general consensus that the Commission has achieved in a short timeframe visible improvements in the CYWR communities, the Commission must move forward and find new ground upon which to build social and economic stability.



Coen Commissioners Elaine Liddy and May Kepple