

# *Understanding the Importance of Cultural Supervision and Support for Aboriginal Workers*

**Western Sydney Aboriginal Women's  
Leadership Program 2013**



A discussion paper brought to you by the Western Sydney  
Aboriginal Women's Leadership Program

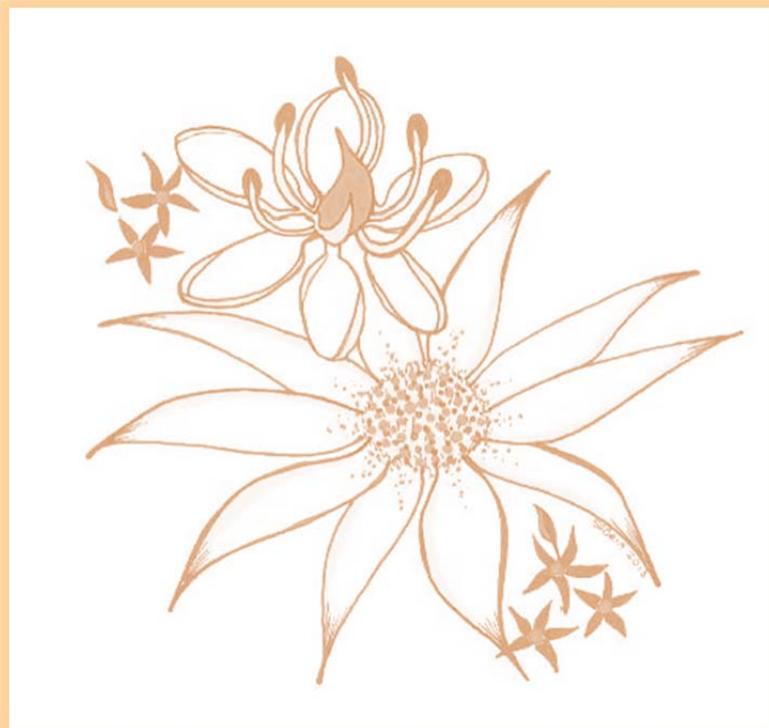
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## Our Story:

The Western Sydney Aboriginal Women's Leadership Program commenced in March 2013 with the aim to give Aboriginal women working in the community sector in Western Sydney a space to come together to share and grow in their cultural identity and connection, and in their capacity to give back to their own communities.

The first of its kind in Western Sydney, this pilot program was written and developed by Aboriginal project worker Jackie Stewart, and funded by Family Worker Training + Development Programme Inc. The Women participating in the program dedicate a day a month to come together for workshops and training as well as completing work between sessions. They have also contributed to the adaption and expansion of the program over time to allow for more cultural content, customs and traditional healing ceremony.

The logo appearing on the front cover is the group's self-chosen Totem. It was painted by group member Sebria Lawrence on behalf of group members design discussions and decision. The Totem is made up of the flannel flower, the fringe myrtle and milk maids. These flowers were chosen by the group, because they are Australian native wild flowers that grow freely throughout NSW and in the other states, matching the diverse birthplaces and traditional country of the women currently engaged in the **'Stronger Women's Voices = Stronger Communities'** Program.



## **Why was this paper written and how can it be used?**

This paper was written as a follow on from group discussions in the Western Sydney Aboriginal Women's Leadership Program about social and professional issues and challenges faced by many Aboriginal workers in the community sector, and the support that is needed to address these issues.

It was decided that a discussion paper might be a useful resource for managers and team leaders to have to help build understanding of these issues and also build the capacity of their agency to best engage and support Aboriginal workers.

It can also be useful for co-workers and peers to have a sound understanding of the unique issues and challenges often faced by Aboriginal workers and how and why cultural support is so important. To this end, this document might also be a useful discussion tool at team meetings and/or interagency and network meetings.

Building understanding of these issues for mainstream managers and co-workers helps to reduce unrealistic expectations of Aboriginal workers and reduce misunderstandings and potential confusion or resentments as to why Aboriginal workers do certain aspects of their work in different ways and/or why engagement and community interactions can often take more time or occur in less formal settings or approaches.

**For more information about this resource or about the Western Sydney Aboriginal Women's Leadership Program please contact:**

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## Introduction:

Access to Cultural supervision and support is relevant and critical for Aboriginal workers in all forms of community services; Government and Non-Government; services and agencies large and small.

For mainstream service managers, team leaders, boards and department heads to fully understand the importance of cultural supervision for Aboriginal workers they must first understand these things:

- ✚ Colonisation and ongoing social change has had a massive impact on Aboriginal Cultural and the capacity of individuals to maintain clear cultural identity, belonging and meaning.
- ✚ Historical injustices and ongoing disadvantage and inequality are still strongly felt in the hearts and minds of Aboriginal families and communities today.
- ✚ Sometimes this pain is named and known, sometimes it is expressed only in pain based behaviours, distress and disadvantage that shows itself in the form of emotional reactivity, poverty, drug and alcohol use, family breakdown, poor physical and mental health, violence, poor education outcomes, unemployment and other social problems.
- ✚ Aboriginal workers are the best link any service will ever have to reaching out to, and supporting, Aboriginal families and communities; and for helping services better understand and interpret community needs. However, for them to do their role effectively, additional cultural support is critical to ensure they are able to understand and hold these cultural issues at the centre to their work.
- ✚ Mainstream services need to recognise that Aboriginal workers are an invaluable resource in their overall aim to provide culturally respectful and relevant service provision.
- ✚ Mainstream services also need to recognise that some aspects of Cultural support and connection can ONLY be gained and shared between Aboriginal people and that cultural meaning, tradition and ways of doing things will be different from mainstream norms and belief systems.

***For Aboriginal workers to be able to best support the cultural strength, healing and sense of belonging of local Aboriginal families and communities, these things must be supported in them too.***

## More of a window into current day Aboriginal life experience:

*The following information is shared from the 'Our story past and present' workshop run in the leadership program in May 2013*

### ***What's Been Taken Away.....***

- × Beliefs
- × Childhoods
- × Connection to land and spirituality
- × Cultural knowledge and lore
- × Culture
- × Dignity
- × Education
- × Family
- × History
- × Identity
- × Life
- × Parents
- × Relationships
- × Respect
- × Rights
- × Self determination
- × Wages
- × Left lost between worlds
- × Ongoing wounds of history repeating itself over and over

### ***What needs to be given back / positive messages need to be re-enforced.....***

- ✓ Acceptance
- ✓ Awareness
- ✓ Connection / Re-connection to family
- ✓ Cultural knowledge and customs
- ✓ Education
- ✓ Empowerment
- ✓ Encouragement to find your own voice
- ✓ History (truth)
- ✓ Initiations to be proud and strong
- ✓ It's OK to be whoever you want to be
- ✓ Language
- ✓ Opportunity to tell your story
- ✓ Re-learning respect for culture/land/spirituality/identity
- ✓ Safe outlets for anger and despair
- ✓ Self-determination
- ✓ There is no shame

***'We know we cannot live in the past but the past lives in us'***

***Dr Charles Nelson Perrurle Perkins AO, 2001***

## What Cultural Supervision and Support Offers Workers:

- ✚ Exploring and recognising culturally based social and emotional issues and culturally relevant ways of interpreting issues and different ways of working with those issues.
- ✚ Identifying cultural relevant resources & programs to best meet community needs.
- ✚ Identifying the differences between cultures (ie: in relation to 'family'; parenting; communication; emotional expression, etc) that may be impacting perceptions and actions of clients and other services. *'If someone doesn't 'get' Aboriginal cultural they can't give you useful advice on effective client work'...*
- ✚ Mentoring and guidance – a *'go to person'* for culturally based questions and information – somewhere where you can listen and be listened to.
- ✚ Naming and drawing on cultural and spiritual meaning and connection to Ancestors. Talking to someone who understands the importance of Aboriginal spirituality and its place in everyday actions and thinking (rarely happens in a general work context).
- ✚ Naming and exploring traditional approaches to communication, healing and conflict resolution that might be helpful in the lives of local families and community.
- ✚ Safe place to debrief on the impacts and experiences of discrimination (subtle and overt) with someone who *'gets it'*.
- ✚ Space to explore issues and talk in a way that has the most cultural meaning for you personally and being understood and responded to from that same place.
- ✚ Specialist support around complex issues such as cultural grief and loss. Talking about cultural identity and meaning, both the joys and the sadness.
- ✚ Support to name and juggle cultural and community complexities and challenges
- ✚ Validation for cultural ways of working, intentions and goals for the approaches you take in your work with the families and community you aim to reach.

## Cultural Supervision and Support Impacts Practice & Client Outcomes:

- ✚ Workers with a stronger sense of self have more confidence in their role and actions.
- ✚ Increased knowledge and confidence on protocols, local traditions and cultural expectations greatly assist work with local Aboriginal families and community.
- ✚ Gives more depth to knowledge and understanding for the unique struggles faced by Aboriginal families and community greatly increases advocacy capacity and effectiveness, eg: Stolen generation links to fear of hospital and formal processes and the flow on impact on health outcomes, relating to schools and parenting.

*Cultural Supervision and Support offers a space that recognises and responds to the two worlds Aboriginal people live in all the time, and opens up doors in the mind and heart as to what is possible....*

## What Form Can Cultural Supervision Take?

Like all forms of professional supervision and workplace support - cultural supervision and support should be provided regularly; be responsive to the special needs and issues of the worker and the role; and be based on clear boundaries and expectations around issues such as confidentiality and rights and responsibilities of both the worker and their cultural support person.

Cultural supervision and support can happen both on an informal and formal basis and can involve varying degrees of cost and time.

In the case of an Aboriginal organisation, for example, conversations and support around culture, cultural experience and problem solving through Aboriginal eyes and hearts happens as a general part of work discussions and meetings. However, even in Aboriginal Organisations there are great benefits to having access to an Elder and/or outside community member that can offer their insights and support to this process.

For Aboriginal workers in mainstream organisations (small and large) and Government agencies there are a number of ways that cultural supervision and support can happen. This can be done by setting up an agreed formal arrangement with an external Elder / cultural supervisor and/or by making time to meet up with other Aboriginal workers from within your own agency or from other agencies on a regular ongoing basis. It is important that Aboriginal workers have the flexibility and time needed to make these connections with other Aboriginal workers and that this is recognised as a valuable support to their role.

In some areas Aboriginal worker support and discussion groups already exist that provide this contact, for example: Yarn Up sessions run each month by the Aboriginal Learning and Development Project at Family Worker Training + Development Program.

*Different Agencies will have different levels of financial capacity to provide cultural supervision for their Aboriginal workers, but within this context it is vital that all agencies and managers give Aboriginal workers the flexibility and time needed to seek out the options that will best meet their needs.*

## Key Considerations for Managers and Team Leaders

- ✓ It is critical that Aboriginal workers be given the flexibility needed to engage and connect with Aboriginal clients and community in culturally relevant and meaningful ways (this has to include face to face, informal connection and participation in cultural events as well as formal issue specific responses).
- ✓ Job descriptions and job contracts for Aboriginal workers need to name and define the flexibility required to respond in culturally relevant and meaningful ways in relation to the role and the access to cultural supervision as part of that role.
- ✓ Include cultural supervision in overall policy and procedures for supervision and staff support.
- ✓ Welcome opportunity to explore and define potential challenges that may arise when trying to balance the formal expectations of the role and cultural considerations, for example maintaining support and duty of care for Aboriginal workers who may spend more time in the field than other workers in ways that are not punitive and/or assuming 'checking up' is needed to make sure workers are 'doing the right thing'.
- ✓ Respect and value your Aboriginal team members and recognise the resource they bring to your agency in terms of helping your service better understand and respond to Aboriginal clients and community (recognising cultural supervision and support enhances this resource and positive flow on outcomes for clients).
- ✓ Be open to hearing how and where Aboriginal cultural traditions, ritual and meaning may impact on Aboriginal workers at your service. For example going to the funerals of community members, even if you are not formally related to them, has significant cultural meaning and importance.
- ✓ Take active steps to inform yourself in relation to critical issues faced by Aboriginal community today, eg: ongoing impacts of the stolen generation, trauma informed care and ongoing inequality, eg: life expectancy, health outcomes, poverty, education, etc. And assess current service delivery to ensure it is informed by these issues.
- ✓ Talk to Aboriginal workers in your team about their ideas and needs in relation to cultural supervision and support.
- ✓ Talk to other services and managers to explore creative ways of offering cultural supervision and support to Aboriginal workers, especially when funds are limited.
- ✓ Recognise the need for everyone in your agency to be exposed to cross cultural awareness training.
- ✓ Build on cross cultural capacity by encouraging all workers to attend Aboriginal cultural events such as NAIDOC Day, Apology Day, holding your own events in Reconciliation Action Week, etc.